A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE INTERPERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF BISEXUAL WOMEN IN A TEAM SPORT ENVIRONMENT

by

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ABSTRACT

While there is a growing amount of research pertaining to the experiences of gay and lesbian participants in sport, there is currently a scarcity of knowledge surrounding the experiences of bisexual individuals within the context of sport. The little literature which does exist fails to address the experiences of bisexual individuals specifically. This study seeks to add to the literature pertaining to bisexual individuals within sport by exploring the experiences of bisexual-identifying women within a team sport context. Through the use of a constructivist epistemology, and employing a symbolic interactionist framework, six semi-structured interviews were analyzed using a methodology rooted in grounded theory. The data showed the current experiences of the Canadian women interviewed within their team sport environments were viewed positively. However, the positive nature of their experiences appeared to be due, in part, to their own successful navigation of their social spheres within sport. The data illustrated that the women's interactions with team members were interpreted differently when they were closeted compared to when they were out to their teams; when closeted, their interactions were often dictated by fear. Regardless of their age, the women described situations where they were uncomfortable in their sport environment because of their bisexual identity. This discomfort led them to manage their stigmatized sexual identities in one of three ways: (1) through remaining closeted and/or avoiding disclosing or discussing their sexual identity; (2) through navigating their interpersonal experiences for the comfort of others; and (3) through finding "supportive environments" where team members were perceived to be accepting their sexual identities.

DEDICATION

To Dr. Charlene Shannon-McCallum for your time, wisdom, consistency, dedication, understanding, compassion, and unwavering support. For holding space for me to learn and grow in more ways than I could have imagined prior to this journey, thank you.

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CIRRICULUM VITAE

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Although an ever growing acronym exists to represent individuals with minority sexual identities (LGBTTQQIAAP[1]), there has been little attention to date regarding how the experiences of individuals with different sexual identities may be unique. The majority of the academic literature currently available pertains to those with gay or lesbian identities. The following thesis used semi-structured interviews to explore the interpersonal experiences of six young, cisgender female, self-identified bisexual athletes within team sport environments. Cisgender is defined as individuals whose gender identity is congruent with the sex assigned to them at birth. The document is organized to first introduce the potential benefits of youth involvement in sport before discussing homo/biphobia in a general context within North America and within the context of sport. I will then discuss the aim and significance of this study and the previous literature as it relates to the experiences of bisexual, cis female, athletes before presenting the methods used for the study. I then discuss the findings before presenting my conclusions and recommendations along with the limitations of the study.

Between the ages of 11 and 19, all but one of the women chose to remain closeted and avoided disclosing their sexual identities until moving away from home to attend university, citing fear of consequences as the main factor in their decisions. They described being uncomfortable at times within their teams, especially at times when they felt that they were compromising "safe spaces" such as change rooms and hotel rooms.

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[1] Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, ally, pansexual. I use the acronym "LGBTTQQIAAP" and the term "queer" interchangeably in an attempt to be inclusive of as many individual identities as possible. At times, abbreviated acronyms are used to more accurately reference source material.

The women in this study used social cues to determine the team climate towards bisexual participants, and used these cues to decide how to manage their identities in one of three ways: (1) through remaining closeted and/or avoiding disclosing or discussing their sexual identity; (2) through navigating their interpersonal experiences for the comfort of others; and (3) through finding “supportive environments” where team members were perceived to be accepting their sexual identities.

The methods used to manage their identities were somewhat dependent on the development of a bisexual identity and whether or not they were 'out' to their sport communities. All of the women interviewed reported that their experiences within sport were mostly positive, a finding which is critically analyzed, as their positive experiences seemed to be the result of their own successful navigation of the sport environments where they participated.

This study contributes new knowledge to the field by presenting the unique interpersonal experiences of bisexual women in team sport and how these experiences changed for them over time. In particular, it sheds light on how the experiences of bisexual women may be different from straight or lesbian women, as bisexuality disrupts the normative, dichotomous view of sexuality within North America. Where there is growing understanding and support for the “born this way” argument for gay and lesbian identities, it has perpetuated an “either or” view of sexuality which leaves little room for individuals who are neither straight nor gay or lesbian (Yoshino, 2000). Additionally, I found that the participants in this study continued to navigate interpersonal experiences on their teams for the comfort of their teammates, even after coming out. Through choosing not to speak about their sexual identities, announcing them, and seeking supportive environments while being aware of social cues that may indicate teammates' discomfort or homo/biphobia, the women in my study were able to create spaces where they were able to enjoy participating in sport.

I conclude the thesis with a brief discussion of the limitations of the study as well as recommendations for future research. I also discuss how the findings from the study can be used to inform coaching practice, sport policy as well as in the development of policy and educational initiatives directed at coaches and other professionals involved in sport.

Sport for Youth Development

Involvement in sport has been recognized as beneficial for youth socially, psychologically, physically, and in terms of motivation to achieve (Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Holt, 2008). Allen (2003) wrote, "the social opportunities inherent in most sports provide opportunities for individuals to develop social relationships and feel that they are part of a group" (p. 553). Youth who participate in sport also report frequent learning experiences in relation to personal development, specifically within the realms of self-knowledge and emotional regulation (Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003). Shaw, Kleiber, and Caldwell (1995) seem to concur as they found that there was a significant positive association between participation in sports and physical activities and level of identity development for cis female adolescents. The formation of a stable identity was noted by Erikson (1980) as the primary developmental task during adolescence, a process which Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, and Braun (2006) noted is, “complex and often difficult” (p.46) for Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (LGB) individuals. Eccles et al. (2009) noted youth who are involved in sport are more likely to enjoy school, and go on to pursue post-secondary education on a full time basis. They are also more likely to be positioned in a job with a significant level of autonomy later in life (Eccles et al., 2003). Furthermore, sport has been recommended as an intervention for individuals who experience symptoms of depression as physical activity has been shown to be effective in reducing these symptoms (Sabiston et al., 2013; Ströhle, 2009). Knowing this, it stands to reason that bisexual, female adolescents who are involved in sport could reap significant rewards. Specifically, Sabiston et al. (2013) pointed to the potential that *team sport* holds as a context for reducing depressive symptoms in adolescent individuals. This is significant given Barker, Richards, Jones, Bowes-Catton, and Plowman (2012) reported that, “Of all the larger sexual identity groups, bisexual people have the worst mental health problems, including high rates of depression, anxiety, self harm and suicidality” (p. 4).

According to Elling and Janssens (2009) heterosexual, lesbian, and bisexual women are equally as likely to participate in mainstream club sports, and lesbian women are overrepresented in sports defined as masculine. However, this study also found all women, regardless of sexual identity, are more likely to participate in individual sports than team sports. However, it should be noted that bisexual women were not included as a separate group within their study. Despite team sport often being viewed as beneficial to those who participate, to my knowledge there is currently no research that has supported these findings while including the voices of bisexual, cis female youth.

Although it is possible that this population reaps benefits from team sport in ways that are similar to those garnered by heterosexual youth, there is a need to further explore their experiences within this context to see whether this is the case.

Homophobia in Sport

Unfortunately, sport has long been recognized as a context where homophobia runs rampant. One of the primary deterrents acting on LGB youth to prevent higher levels of participation in team sport may be the culture of homophobia and homophobic language that exists within sport. The climate of heterosexism and homophobia within sport has been well documented (Anderson, 2008; Gill, Morrow, Collins, Lucey, & Schultz., 2010; Lenskyj, 2003). Further, within the context of sport, homophobic remarks are high and rates of intervention by coaches is relatively low (Gill et al., 2010). There are myriad ways in which homophobia can be seen in women's sport (Griffin, 2002), and the struggles of female participants have been well documented (Anderson & Bullingham, 2013; Griffin, 2002; Lenskyj, 2003) as athletes attempt to carve out a space for participation while being concerned that onlookers will question their sexuality. Kauer and Krane (2006) wrote that in 15 interviews with cis female athletes they found that, "the primary stereotypes directed at them were that they were lesbian and masculine" (p. 42). As a result, female athletes engage, sometimes even unknowingly, in reputation management, or what Krane and Kauer (2006) called "social mobility" where they attempt to access greater power and autonomy through the performance of hegemonic femininity which includes the quality of heterosexuality. Athletes who take part in "masculine" sports grow their hair long and use pink equipment in alignment with dominant expressions of heterosexual femininity (Davis-Delano, Pollock, & Vose, 2009).

Loftus (2001) noted a significant shift in Americans' attitudes towards homosexuality between 1973 and 1998. This shift could account for some of the progress in the decreasing level of homophobia in sport noted by Anderson (2011). In addition to this decline, there seems to be increased support for sexual minority youth through organizations such as the Trevor Project and the You Can Play Project, which spread the message that bullying based on sexual identity is unacceptable, and that athletes' abilities should be the only measure of their worth.

Homophobia in North American Sport

Anderson (2011) noted much of the research that has been conducted in the area of homophobia in sport was executed at a time in North American society that is referred to as exhibiting high "homohysteria", when homophobia was especially pervasive. This means that findings from the 1980s and 1990s, when homohysteria was high, may not hold true to the same extent today given that gay and lesbian individuals have experienced growing acceptance since the 1980s and 1990s (Keleher & Smith, 2012). This is important because, as Keleher and Smith (2012) pointed out, the history of American public policy as it pertains to LGB individuals differs to a large degree from Canadian policy where same-sex marriage is concerned. Where homosexual acts were decriminalized in Canada in 1969 (Bill C-150), it took until 2003 for all individual US states to do the same. Likewise, where same-sex marriage has been legal in Canada since 2005 because of the passing of Bill C-38, the Civil Marriage Act, until recently, this issue was still being debated in the court systems of many American states. This means that findings pertaining to the recent experiences of young LGB athletes in the United States, most notably in several studies by Anderson (2002, 2011) as well as Adams and Anderson (2012), may not hold true to the same extent in Canada. Because of this, there is value in exploring the experiences of Canadian LGBTTQQIAAP athletes who continue to participate in team sport despite the homophobic culture that exists.

Unfortunately, within social research overall, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT[2]) individuals tend to be presented as a homogeneous group with little diversity. LGBTTQQIAAP males and females are often amalgamated and studied as “sexual minorities” (Russell & Seif, 2001). However, within the world of sport there has been a teasing apart of male and female athletes as it is typically a gender segregated institution. This means that there is a considerable amount of information being produced that pertains to gay/bisexual male athletes and lesbian/bisexual female athletes. Although this is a step in the right direction, Griffin wrote (2012) that, “Though ‘LGBT’ roles off of our tongues easily, efforts to differentiate biphobia from homophobia and the experiences of lesbian and gay athletes and coaches from those bisexual athletes and coaches are rare” (p.10). Kaufman and Johnson (2004) also critiqued social research pertaining to the LGBT community when they claimed, “researchers on gay and lesbian identity have created a restricted literature that emphasizes the uniqueness of gays and lesbians but also fails to recognize the connections to broader theoretical concerns” (p. 810). Of noteworthy importance to Kaufman and Johnson (2004) were the social-psychological factors which influence identity development more broadly, beyond sexual identity. This study contributes to filling the gaps noted by Griffin (2012) as well as Kaufman and Johnson (2004).

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[2] I use an abbreviated acronym here because it is the acronym most often used in academic literature, and little research pertains to identities which fall outside of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender.

Aim and Significance

The aim of this study is to shed light on the experiences of young, bisexual, women who participate in team sport within Canada. The focus is on the exploration of the interpersonal experiences that these athletes have with teammates, parents of team members, and coaching staff. The study sheds light on how these athletes make sense of such experiences.

The hope is that this information will be able to inform the education of the coaches of female teams in such a way as to provide all athletes with positive and supportive experiences within the context of team sport. The study contributes to the relatively small body of academic knowledge on the experiences of bisexual athletes participating in team sport. Furthermore, it will explore how the experiences of bisexual, cis female, Canadian athletes may differ from the experiences of their peers in other Western countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE ON SEXUAL IDENTITY AND SPORT

This chapter will first discuss the issue of the invisibility of bisexual individuals within Western society as well as the plethora of possible definitions for the term "bisexual". Following this, I will define bisexuality as it was utilized for my study before discussing the literature as it relates to athletes who identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the relationships between gender, sexual identity, sport and the female apologetic, which sees female athletes acting in ways that make their participation in the male preserve of sport more socially acceptable.

Bisexual Invisibility

Savin-Williams wrote, "sexual-minority youths do not comprise a monolithic population, but are a diverse collection of individuals who diverge among themselves in significant and predictable ways" (2001, p.6). Within this "diverse collection" of sexual minority youth, those who identify as both cis female and bisexual are only a small component which has attracted little attention to date.

Bisexuality is often described as being "invisible" or "silent" (Eisen, 2013). This is partly because within North American society, where monogamy is recognized as the cultural norm, it is nearly impossible for a bisexual individual to be identified based on the gender of their significant other. There is a cultural assumption that a female who has a female partner is a lesbian while a female with a male partner is heterosexual (Bradford, 2004). Hartman (2011) concurred with this, writing "the assumption that one's sexual behavior determines his or her sexual identity, leaves little room for bisexuals" (p. 65). This paired with the idea that initial research defined sexuality as a dichotomous construct where individuals were seen as heterosexual or homosexual (Chapman & Brannock, 1987) means that bisexuality as a distinct identity has been largely ignored. Rust (1993) wrote:

> bisexuality was either considered nonexistent or conceptualized as an intermediate state between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Bisexual identity, therefore, might be adopted as a stepping-stone on the way to homosexual identity (e.g. Chapman and Brannock 1987) but was not considered an end in itself. (p. 51)

Bradford (2004) added:

> The binary categorization of sexualization excludes the possibility of flexible, fluid sexuality because it associates bisexuality with conflict and confusion (Paul, 1985). The experience of bisexual people must be considered within the context of this dichotomy. (p. 9)

Given this, it is not surprising that Russell and Seif (2001) pointed out that there is very little academic literature regarding bisexual females, and bisexuality more generally. They credited this lack of research primarily to, "political and funding realities" (p. 77), and noted that the topic of adolescent same-sex attraction is "a politically volatile subject" (p. 77). Bradford (2004) also lamented this lack of research, stating, "we have as yet only limited qualitative research on the lived experience of self-identified bisexual women and men" (p. 11).

Another contributing factor to the lack of academic research regarding bisexual women may be the seemingly negative opinion that the general public holds of this demographic. In an attitudinal survey, Herek (2002) found Americans' attitudes toward bisexual men and women were less favourable than any group with the exception of intravenous drug users, and that heterosexual women rated bisexual individuals less favourably than they rated homosexuals. A final possibility for the lack of research regarding bisexuality may be the fact that the term itself is difficult to define and operationalize (Eisen, 2013). With this in mind, I turn to a discussion of the many potential definitions of bisexuality.

Defining Bisexuality

There is significant variability in the definition of bisexuality. Savin-Williams (2001) noted that a major concern when conducting research with sexual-minority individuals is defining the relevant population. In the past, the term bisexuality has been used as a label for biological hermaphordism (Hemmings, 1997), as well as a label for individuals who, regardless of their self-prescribed orientation, are sexually active with men and women, or as a descriptor for individuals who fall somewhere on a continuum between heterosexual and homosexual (Eisen, 2013). The term bisexual can be an identity that an individual claims for themselves (Callis, 2009) in addition to being used to describe individuals who are attracted to more than one gender (Barker et al., 2012). Included within this definition are those who self-identify as being attracted to both men and women, those who are mostly, but not exclusively, attracted to one gender, those who experience sexual identity as fluid, those who are attracted to individuals 'regardless of gender' and those who dispute the idea that there are only two genders and that individuals are attracted to “one, the other, or both” (Barker et al., 2012, p. 3).

Adding to the confusion, Eisen (2013) noted, “Recently the word bisexual has been assigned a new use with increasing popularity; that of an umbrella term for multiple bispectrum identities, those that involve attraction to people of more than one sex and/or gender” (p. 28). This means that it is a term being used to denote a spectrum of identities from polysexual, pansexual, queer, multisexual or those who do not identify with any one particular label. In contrast, Symons, Sbaraglia, Hillier, and Mitchell (2010) defined bisexuals as, “people attracted to both sexes in varying degrees” (p. 5).

Bisexuality “'resists all adequate definition,' since no definition of bisexuality can ever be either inclusive enough or specific enough” (Eisner, 2013, p. 156). Despite this, in the world of research, defining bisexuality, although challenging, is required. Although it is unlikely that one definition will be approved of by all, one must be chosen until such a time when it becomes unnecessary. For the purpose of this study, bisexuality will be defined as an identity that is voluntarily chosen by the individual, which denotes that an individual is not heterosexual, homosexual, or asexual. This may also include individuals who prefer not to ascribe a label to their sexuality.

It is easy to see how the lack of a consistent, easily operationalized definition could contribute to the lack of research in the area of bisexuality. Although, recently, several studies have looked at bisexuals as a unique population (e.g., Andre et al., 2014; Cardom, Rostosky, & Danner, 2013; Saewyc et al., 2009), there is still little available in terms of research pertaining to bisexuality, and as a result, I will move on to speak more generally about the literature regarding gay and lesbian individuals and sport.

Sexual Minority Athletes

Anderson (2002) found that, although there has been a decrease in homophobia within the context of sport compared to the 1990s, a certain degree of homophobia still remains. With his sample of male athletes in college and high school settings, he found that although homophobic acts were present, athletes themselves did not feel as though they experienced homophobia or were victimized based on their sexual identity. This seems to fit with the suggestion that overt homophobia, both culturally and within sport, is decreasing (Anderson, 2002). A more recent study of lesbian athletes found an elevated amount of hostility towards these individuals from their teammates compared to that found within men's teams (Anderson & Bullingham, 2013). Davis-Delano (2014) spoke to this ranging level of acceptance vs. homophobia within women's sport finding that, while some sporting contexts can be nurturing for lesbian and bisexual women, in other contexts, team sport, in particular, can involve a homophobic climate which can be detrimental to their development of same-sex attractions and relationships. Such findings are supported by earlier literature regarding the elevated levels of homophobia within female team sports (Anderson & Bullingham, 2013; Griffin, 1992). As Anderson and Bullingham (2013) stated, “Sociologists examining the issue of lesbians in sport during the 1980s and 1990s agree that organized team sports were normally characterized as highly homophobic organizational cultures” (p. 1). Unfortunately, within the same article, it was pointed out that, “there is a 'missing decade’ (1999-2011), in which we can find no literature on openly lesbian athletes in the United States, or other Englishspeaking nations, competing in predominately heterosexual teams" (p. 2). Because of this 'missing decade' of research, there is little in the realm of more recent work to either support or refute these findings.

In discussing the experiences of bisexual and lesbian athletes in the United Kingdom, Maddocks (2013) found that some participants spoke about excluding heterosexual female athletes, seeming to create a social group that excluded players to some degree based on their heterosexual identity. Interestingly, participants seemed to talk about being straight on a soccer team as a stigmatized identity. Other participants spoke of feelings of exclusion because of the use of nicknames that referenced their bisexuality. The idea of sexuality as a binary entity was present when female participants (straight and lesbian) spoke of bisexual athletes as insincere and "untrustworthy" as well as the idea that bisexuality is a "transitory identity".

Within Maddocks' (2013) study, two participants spoke of the concept of sexual fluidity and a desire to resist labeling their identity specifically as "bisexual". Another participant talked about a bisexual teammate who was not excluded and, rather, was confident and highly respected amongst team members. Notably, "The discourse of sexual identity as akin to a *choice that can indeed be made* served to construct bisexuals and non-labelled individuals as deviant within football culture" (p. 86). Five participants spoke to the idea that bisexuality is an identity that is denied credibility within soccer teams. Maddocks also pointed out that the lack of a consistent definition for bisexuality plays a role in the lack of legitimacy awarded to bisexual individuals within western culture. Additionally, she wrote that bi-phobia falls low on the list of equality-management priorities as other groups are deemed to be in greater need of assistance.

In some of the only other literature regarding female bisexuality and sport, Drury (2011), also based in the UK, found bisexuality to be a “silenced identity” within lesbian sports communities. Lesbian and bisexual athletes in Kauer and Krane's (2006) study spoke to this silencing when they admitted to concealing their sexual identities in order to attempt to disrupt stereotypes and avoid fuelling the idea that all female athletes are lesbian. In contrast, Anderson, McCormack and Ripley (2013) found that although there were negative experiences in sport described by the 15 bisexual cis female youth who they interviewed in the UK, most described being accepted overall by their peers. In the study above, there appeared to be a culture within the social settings that these youth found themselves in which did not accept the presence of homo/biphobia.

Masculinity, Gender and Sport

Sport has come to be synonymous with the preferred form of masculinity or hegemonic masculinity in North American culture (Connell, 1995). To be an athlete, especially in team sport, means to be strong, aggressive, competitive, and physical (Lenskyj, 1990). When sport is linked to hegemonic masculinity, it is linked by association to male heterosexuality (Gill et al., 2010; Lenskyj, 2003). It is this process of association that distances masculinity and sport from homo/bisexuality resulting in the creation of a homo/biphobic environment. Kauer and Krane (2006) spoke to the link between sexuality and masculinity when they pointed out that the women they interviewed suggested that the lesbian and masculine stereotypes of female athletes seem to have the same foundation in the lack of female athletes' adherence to traditional gender norms. It is because this link exists that an examination of the intersection of masculinity, gender and sexuality within sport is valuable.

Messner (2012) said that one of the purposes of sport is to "socialize boys and young men to hierarchical, competitive, and aggressive values…" (p. 288). To be masculine is to be big, strong, physical, aggressive and heterosexual, what Khayatt (2006) called 'impenetrable'. As a male, to be something other than heterosexual, is to be something other than truly masculine. Within North American society, the alternative is to risk being associated with femininity. In the process of distancing homo/bisexuality from masculinity, and associating it with femininity, sexual identity becomes inextricably linked to the concept of gender (Khayatt, 2006).

It is with the knowledge that sexuality and gender are intertwined that I shift the focus to women and the creation of gender. Krane (2001) wrote, "Characteristics of hegemonic femininity include being emotional, passive, dependent, maternal, compassionate, and gentle. On the other hand, strength, competitiveness, assertiveness, confidence, and independence are characteristics of hegemonic masculinity" (p. 117). Women in sport have a problem not unlike that of gay men; both must be cautious of how they participate in sport. But, where gay males are told that they are not manly enough to engage in sport, women who participate in sport and demonstrate masculine qualities live with the threat of being labeled as unfeminine and therefore not truly female (Lenskyj, 2003). Kauer and Krane (2006) concluded that women athletes who fail to perform the hegemonic version of femininity (small, weak, long hair, heterosexual) face stigmatization that labels them as masculine and lesbian. Because women athletes' behaviour of participating in sport is seen as what West and Zimmerman (1987) called "doing" masculinity, they run the risk of having their sexuality questioned. If a woman demonstrates masculine qualities through sport participation, she has failed to demonstrate the hegemonic form of femininity and as a result, she risks being labeled as lesbian which, in our society, is equated with being a failed woman (Lenskyj, 2003). However, it is through their demonstration of qualities engrained within hegemonic masculinity, such as strength within a team sport context, that women disrupt and challenge the myth of gender (Anderson, 2007).

Gender is socially constructed (Kane, 1995) and what is masculine and feminine is specific to time and culture. As Connell (2002) suggests, "Different cultures, and different periods of history, construct gender differently" (p. 162). Because of this is, there is a need to recognize that in discussing masculinity and femininity, it is actually *hegemonic masculinity;* or the form of masculinity that is most desirable in our culture, and the feminine opposition to it, that are being discussed. "The dominance of hegemonic masculinity over other forms may be quiet and implicit, but it may also be vehement and violent, as in the case of homophobic violence" (Connell, 2002, p. 163). Because most team sports are seen as masculine, women (and gay men) who participate often disrupt society's construction of gender (Gill et al., 2010; Lenskyj, 2003). Lenskyj (2003) noted that it is through the continual disruption of the construction of gender that feminists over the past 20 years have started to create change.

Women, Femininity and Sport

Women have navigated their way into and are thriving within the masculine preserve of sport and in doing so, they show that being a female does not require the display of feminine qualities to the exclusion of all else. But, according to Lenskyj (1994) and Messner (2002), women can only disrupt these constructions of gender to a certain degree – their power is limited. They are not males within the male preserve of sport, and they do not disrupt gender constructions without repercussions. When women participate in physically rough sports which are generally seen as masculine (or unfeminine), their sexuality is considered suspect.

Griffin (2002) wrote about this phenomenon as the creation of the "mannish lesbian" within the world of sport. Women who participate in sports that are not traditionally feminine, such as basketball or soccer, and spending significant amounts of time in a homosocial environment such as a sport team have historically been seen as disruptive to compulsory heterosexuality and femininity (Lenskyj 1994; Veri, 1999). As a result of this, as well as the negative social stigma around being a lesbian, females in sport are in a situation where fear of the lesbian label is used to exert control over their actions and how they engage in sport (Griffin, 2002).

Homophobia can be seen in women's sport in a multitude of ways: through the silence of lesbian athletes who avoid coming out, the denial of coaches and administrators that there are lesbians in sport, the promotion of a feminine image of athletes through uniform restrictions, the promotion of a "heterosexy image" (Griffin, 1992, p. 255) which seeks to frame female athletes as sexually appealing in a heterosexual context, the preference for male coaches, as well as openly homophobic attacks and practices such as the prohibition of lesbian athletes and/or coaches within certain teams and organizations (Griffin, 2002). Although they disrupt gender constructs by competing in masculine sports, women in sport are not free from the homophobia that permeates sport culture.

Female Apologetic and Homophobia

The idea of a female apologetic within sport has been discussed briefly, but I now turn my attention to a larger discussion of this concept and how it pertains to the control of female LGB athletes. The female apologetic includes actions by female athletes that function to make their presence in sport less threatening to men and society at large (Ezzell, 2009). Davis-Delano et al. (2009) listed a wide range of behaviours within the scope of the apologetic such as advocating conservative gender ideas, minimizing muscular development, moving in feminine ways, and associating with boyfriends. Additionally, Ezzell (2009) noted that some strategies can be classified as "defensive othering" which functions to reproduce inequality by "reinforcing the power of stigmatizing labels by arguing that the label is true for other members of their social category, but not for themselves" (p. 114). Examples of this practice might include the exclusion of athletes who are not heterosexual or fail to fit feminine beauty ideals (Davis-Delano et al., 2009).

Athletes engage in defensive othering in order to appear as less of a threat to hegemonic masculinity. Ezzell (2009) wrote, "Members of subordinated groups may use defensive othering to specifically deflect resistance to their participation in dominant-identified institutions" (p. 114). In short, female athletes create a space where it is safe for them to take part in sport without having their sexual identity fall into question, but to create that space, in addition to other apologetic acts, they exclude those who they feel place their identity into question to begin with. Blinde and Taub noted this association in writing that "interactions with known homosexuals lead outsiders to label athletes 'guilty by association'" (p. 525). This association is precisely what is being contested through apologetic acts of defensive othering and homophobia within female sport.

A potentially unforeseen fallout of this reputation management is the control of not only an individual's own actions and appearance, but the control of the actions and appearance of teammates. Ezzell (2009) observed that even on a team with self-identified bisexual and lesbian players, the team, as a collective, presented itself as heterosexual. The worry is that if one athlete is lesbian, then by association due to the close relationships that often develop between teammates, her teammates must also be lesbian. Of her former rugby team, one lesbian athlete in Ezzell's study stated:

> There was definite internalized homophobia and sexism and, like, people didn't want to look certain ways, they didn't think that certain ways of expression in your, in your, I don't know, in your body image were okay – even if you were a lesbian... they would be like, "I don't care how much of a lesbian you are, you should shave your legs." (p. 120)

Within the same study, individual players learned the importance of supporting the collective image of the team in order to protect the group (Ezzell, 2009).

Although apologetic behaviour can function to ostracize LGBT participants in female sport, Davis-Delano et al. (2009) does note that there are instances where such behaviour is not seen among female athletes. A potential explanation given for this is that "some female athletes do not conceive of sport participation as related to gender and sexual orientation" (p. 133). If this is the case, perhaps there is more room than there initially appears to be within sport for female athletes with marginalized sexual identities.

Sport is "a core social institution built around competition, hegemonic masculinity, and the suppression of empathy. What happens on the field has consequences for life off of it" (Ezzell, 2009, p.127). Because of this, and given the lack of knowledge regarding the experiences of bisexual cis female athletes as a distinct and unique population, the research questions that will guide this study are: (a) What are the interpersonal experiences of young, cis female, bisexual athletes with teammates, the parents of teammates, and coaching staff within the context of team sport?; (b) How do young, cis female, bisexual athletes make sense of, and ascribe meaning to these interpersonal experiences?

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

This study used semi-structured interviews to explore the interpersonal experiences of young, cisgender female, bisexual individuals in team sport. It also explored how those experiences are interpreted by the participants. The research is grounded in a constructivist epistemology and employs symbolic interactionist theory in order to explore the participants' interpretations of their experiences. The data were analyzed qualitatively using a methodology rooted in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). Queer theory was considered as a methodological option but not pursued, in part because it has ignored bisexuality to date (Callis, 2009).

The epistemology and theory for this study are informed by the research questions being asked. Symbolic interactionism, as a theory, focuses on the dynamic nature of social interactions and seeks to study and understand the meaning that humans prescribe to those interactions (Charon, 1979). This fits well with a constructivist epistemology which suggests that reality is *created* through people's actions and their interpretations of those actions (Ültanir, 2012). Longmore (1998) conveyed succinctly the link between symbolic interactionism and research pertaining to sexuality when she stated "the symbolic meanings associated with sexuality affect how we think about ourselves, how we relate to others, and how others think and relate to us" (p. 44). Further, Longmore (1998) noted that, within symbolic interactionism, there is a focus on face-to-face interactions among individuals. Additionally, Plummer (2003) noted symbolic interactionism is a popular approach to studies involving sexuality, as sexuality is always socially produced by human actors.

Within my study I focused on the participants' interpretations of their interactions with team members, making symbolic interactionism a good methodological fit. In viewing sexual identity as a fluid construct that is created by individual actors in a social environment, symbolic interactionist theory became a logical choice for this study.

Grounded theory is the guiding methodology because it allows for new theory to be developed to explain how bisexual, cis females make sense of their experiences as participants within team sport. There was previously a lack of academic theory in this area. Additionally, using methods from grounded theory allowed me to inductively synthesize the data to explain how the participants made sense of their interactions with their teammates within the context of sport (Mills, Bonnar, & Francis, 2006).

Symbolic interactionist research was tied directly to grounded theory by Charmaz (2006), who supported the use of one in conjunction with the other, stating, “research participants' implicit meanings, experiential views – and researchers' finished grounded theories – are constructions of reality” (p. 10). She seemed to speak to a strong relationship between the two again, when she clarified that “the empirical world does not appear to us in some natural state apart from human experience. Rather, we know the empirical world through language and the actions we take toward it” (p. 46). Grounded theory has been used together with symbolic interactionism by Jeon (2004) who noted a philosophical fit between the two. I chose to use methods from grounded theory in conjunction with symbolic interactionism because of this relationship.

In this chapter I will first discuss reflexivity within my research before describing the participants and recruitment strategy. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the instruments and data analysis procedures.

Researcher Reflexivity

As a researcher, I acknowledge that my experiences have an impact on how I selected my research questions, and viewed and interpreted the data. Like the participants in this work, I am a young, cisgender female who has access to white privilege; meaning that although I am Métis, I present as Caucasian and in doing so I am afforded access to privileges that might be denied or more difficult to access if I were to otherwise self-identify. Additionally, I have participated in various team sports throughout my life, including hockey, volleyball, basketball, fastball, slow-pitch (or softball), and synchronized skating. Although I did not identify as a sexual minority during the years that I participated in sport most heavily, I have come to understand sexuality as a fluid and evolving entity in my life.

Today, if asked to categorize myself, I would, and do, actively resist doing so. My reason for this is a political one, as it is my hope that in resisting the use of a single word to define my sexual identity, others will be encouraged to see the identity politics and societal "othering" that result from invoking a label. As Butler stated, "identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression" (Butler, 1991, p. 13-14).

That being said, I recognize the importance of reflexivity within the qualitative research paradigm and within grounded theory research as it contributes to the rigour of such studies by increasing the transparency of how data are created (Hall & Callery, 2001). Further, I recognize that Western society currently resists the idea that sexuality is, at times, too complex and individually unique to be reduced to the choice of one of only a handful of terms. It is with the knowledge of the importance of reflexivity, and the hope that increased visibility of marginalized identities will contribute to a larger discussion of sexual identity, that I state my identification with a multitude of terms including “bisexual” and “queer”. I disclosed my identity with all participants who indicated their interest in the subject or a general interest in my motivation for conducting the study. In some interviews, no discussion of my identity took place, rather, participants made assumptions about my inclusion in the queer community. I believe that my firsthand experience with how complex and personal a discussion about the experiences surrounding an individual's sexual identity can be allowed me to remain sensitive to, and respectful of participants while still gathering rich qualitative information.

Recruitment

Recruitment criteria for the study required participants to be cis women between the ages of 18 to 29 and to self-identify as bisexual. Additionally, participants were asked to have participated in a team sport within the past year. Several methods of recruitment were employed for this study. Initially, posters advertising the study were placed in the stalls of female washrooms within athletic facilities at a post-secondary institution. In my experience within the field of marketing and recruitment, young people do not typically pay attention to posters on bulletin boards or in hallways. A study by Androit Digital (2014) found that traditional print media, such as billboards and magazines is least influential to millennial youth with the exception of radio. However, with little else to demand their attention in washroom stalls, there is a greater chance that recruitment posters will actually be read there. In addition to this, locating posters within washroom stalls allowed potential participants who may have be closeted to read the information privately without drawing attention to themselves. I obtained permission to put up recruitment posters in the athletic facilities of one university campus, however, they were quickly removed. I replaced the posters and they were removed again within a two-day period. As a result, I explored other recruitment methods.

I made social media posts on both Twitter and Facebook and several contacts shared the recruitment information through Facebook. I also made posts and requests for participants through the Facebook pages for university Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) groups, community GSA groups, and roller derby teams. Roller derby teams were approached at the suggestion of the participants in the study and several personal acquaintances with queer identities. Requests for participants were also posted to Reditt (a news, entertainment, and social media website) on both the “roller derby” and “bisexual” subreditt pages (online communities within Reditt).

Mutual friends and acquaintances facilitated the recruitment of the first and seventh participants. The first participant acted as one of two connections to the second participant. The third participant was a personal contact of the researcher and the fourth participant was recruited through a mutual acquaintance's post to social media. The fifth participant was recruited through her connection to the administrator of a university GSA's social media page and the sixth participant was recruited through a post to her roller derby team's webpage, where recruitment information was available.

Several challenges were involved in recruiting bisexual individuals for participation, one being the vast number of labels for identities within the spectrum of bisexuality, and another being the stigma attached to bisexual identities which can encourage social isolation (Sullivan & Losberg, 2003). Both of these factors may have played a role in the difficulty experienced in recruiting participants. Recruitment was biased towards individuals who were active on social media and/or connected to others who were connected to social media, myself, or my friends and acquaintances. Because initial contact with several participants occurred by recruitment through university and post-secondary institutions, it is unlikely that I would have reached individuals of low socioeconomic status. Likewise, because potential participants would need to be ‘out’ to at least one contact, the study was limited to individuals who were not completely closeted.

Participants

I interviewed seven women between the ages of 21 and 25 for this study and interviews from six of them were analyzed and included within the findings of the study. The qualitative information from one woman's interview was excluded from analysis because she had no current involvement in sport and had no experience to draw on as a self-identified bisexual athlete, as she did not self-identify at the time when she participated in sport. To protect their anonymity, the remaining women will be discussed here as a collective although it should be noted that each had her own unique set of experiences to share.

All participants had access to white privilege and had attended university for at least three years. Five of the women spoke to experiences in different communities and provinces, and all seven of the women interviewed had lived in multiple communities, most having lived in more than one Canadian province. Two spoke of experiences in Alberta, one in a rural community and another in an urban centre. One woman spoke about her experience in rural British Columbia, and another had spent the majority of her life in an urban centre in Saskatchewan. Two of the women spent time in an urban centre in Nova Scotia and three had spent time in at least one urban centre in New Brunswick. One of these women also had experience within a rural community in New Brunswick and another had lived in two urban centers. One women spoke of experiences in several urban centres in Ontario.

Two of the women spoke of their experiences as competitive wrestlers, another two were involved in the sport of roller derby, and two more played soccer: one competitively, and one both semi-competitively and recreationally. Two women had experience on co-ed recreational teams, one in university intramural sport and one in dodgeball. One woman spoke of her past experience playing rugby and another spoke of her past experience in figure skating, including her participation on a synchronized skating team. One woman also spoke of her experience as a coach. Many of the women were also involved in additional team and individual sports throughout their lives, but these activities were typically spoken about in passing and did not appear to be salient to their identities. However, at times some of the women spoke of defining moments that occurred in these secondary athletic activities.

All six women were out to their sport communities as well as their communities more broadly, meaning they did not actively attempt to conceal their bisexual identities, and believed that the members of their communities were aware of their sexual identities at least to the extent of their not identifying as straight. It is also noteworthy that each of the women spoke about being involved in supporting other LGBTTQQIAAP individuals through their choice of career, avocations, advocacy, and/or activism. Some were involved in GSA organizations and advocacy groups, others worked with queer youth and noted their attempts to improve the experiences of those individuals.

Each woman self-identified as 'bisexual' when they were recruited for participation, however, there was a significant amount of diversity in how each of the women communicated her sexual identity during her interview. One preferred to avoid a label, simply identifying as “not straight”. One woman was married to a female partner and typically identified herself to her sport community as “married” although she preferred the term “bisexual” for describing her sexual identity. Three identified with the term “bisexual” while two preferred the term “pansexual”. For some, these two labels referred to the same idea; that they are attracted to individuals across the gender spectrum. Some of the women preferred the inclusivity of the term “pansexual” while others preferred the term “bisexual” because it attached them to a community. Additionally, two of the women identified as polyamorous and one identified as both female and third gender. Four of the women also used the generic term “queer” to identify themselves as part of a larger LGBTTQQIAAP community.

Two of the women recollected first identifying as “not straight” at the age of 14 and two others first felt this way at 15. Two others remembered feeling different at 11 and 14, but didn't identify as members of the queer community until age 17 or 18 and 21 respectively. Only one of the women came out within her sport, and school communities immediately after identifying as bisexual at the age of 14. The other five participants remained closeted until after they had moved away from their family homes to attend university.

The names of all of the women have been changed to protect their anonymity. A number of the participants spoke about the relationship between gender and sexual identity and in order to respect their gender identity, rather than implying a requisite level of femininity, gender neutral names were chosen purposefully.

For the purposes of this study, a team was originally defined as a group of three or more people who participate in regular sport competitions together against opposing teams. Examples include volleyball, basketball, ice hockey, football, and soccer. The understanding of what constitutes a team was revised early in the study as one participant spoke of her experience on her wrestling team. For her, the salient characteristic of what constituted a team seemed to be the interpersonal connection and the relationships built with the other members of the wrestling team. Although she had experiences within a more traditional team sport context, she spoke primarily of her time spent in the sport of wrestling. Another woman who was interested in participating in the study expressed a similar sentiment in an email,

> Wrestling’s an individual sport so I know I don't meet your criteria to be included, but I figured I'd offer just in case you could use me anyway (wrestling is a sport in which we practice as a team and have many team dynamics - we just compete individually).

Participants self-identified as bisexual and had a minimum of one season of experience on a non-segregated team. Segregated sport teams are defined as those created to serve, and comprised of, primarily participants who identify as members of the LGBT community. Because the research questions pertained to team sport athletes who have experience as minorities on their teams, it would be counterproductive to include those who participate on teams where possessing a minority identity is the norm. Self-identification, however, is not the only method of identifying individuals within the LGB community, as the definition of gay, lesbian or bisexual is often operationalized using past same sex experiences as a gauge (Martin & Knox, 2000). However, self-identification was chosen as the method to identify participants in this study for two reasons. The first is that because the label as gay, lesbian or bisexual carries with it a social stigma, it is unlikely that someone would falsely identify themselves as such (Martin & Knox, 2000). The second reason is that operationalizing the definition using past experiences would eliminate those who identify as LGB but have no past experiences with partners of the same or different genders.

Instruments

All interviews were conducted by me and guided by an interview script (Appendix). Interviews were audio-recorded using a digital recorder, and transcribed on a computer into text files using open source word processing software, LibreOffice. A computer with the Skype videoconferencing program, video camera and microphone were used when Skype interviews were required due to distance. Use of video-conferencing for carrying out interviews with a hidden population, such as bisexual individuals, is supported by Matthews and Cramer (2008). They noted that it is a valid alternative when face-to-face interviews are not possible due to physical distance between the researcher and participants.

Procedure

Design. After participants were recruited I provided an information letter, which discussed the risks and benefits associated with the study, as well as a consent form. All participants indicated that they had read and understood the consent form and provided consent. Interviews took place at a location of the participant's choosing. I reminded participants before the interview began that it was being recorded, and that their anonymity would be protected by removing their names and references to specific people and places during the transcription process.

Open ended, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were conducted and lasted between 42 to 107 minutes. An interview guide listing questions and I pilot tested specific probes by interviewing several of my friends and acquaintances who were athletes as well as members of the LGBT community. Although these individuals did not meet the requirements for participation in the study, their experiences as bisexual individuals and/or LGBT athletes allowed them to speak to the interview questions at least to some degree. I used the knowledge gained from pilot testing to improve the interview guides prior to interviewing participants. At times I diverged from the interview guide to gain insight into emerging themes within interviews. For example, several of the women spoke of social experiences outside of sport as salient to their experiences within a sport context. Because of this, there were often periods within interviews where the focus shifted from sport to participants' experiences within school or family contexts. I continued to review and revise the interview guides throughout the interview process. Changes to the interview guide were informed by the data analysis, which began following the first interview (Birks & Mills, 2011).

Immediately following each interview, I recorded field notes in order to collect data that could not be captured via audio recording during the interview. These included observations of participants' physical reactions during the interview, discussion of the language employed by participants, and/or data shared by the participants when the digital recording device was turned off as recommended by Charmaz (2006). I recorded field notes by writing via phone or laptop (both password protected). Following recording, I transferred field notes to a password protected computer as soon as possible following the interviews, and subsequently deleted from the device(s) used for their initial capture.

Data analysis. I used NVivo software to aid in the analysis of transcribed data. Charmaz (2006) suggested, “grounded theory methods work best when the grounded theorist engages in data collection as well as data analysis” (p. 34). Because of this, as soon as possible following each interview, I uploaded the audio recording onto a password protected computer and saved as a raw file in two different locations. After a period of no fewer than 24 hours and no more than 72 hours, I reviewed the audio recording of the interview and the field notes. Additional notes regarding the circumstances of interviews, such as body language, and information shared after the recording device was turned off, were added as needed. I transcribed the interviews into text files throughout the data-collection process. I protected the confidentiality of participants through the transcription process by changing their names and the names of anyone named during the interview. I also removed references to specific towns and cities. Transcribed data were saved as text files on a password protected computer. I then uploaded interviews into the NVivo program following transcription, and the initial coding process began after the first interview was completed and transcribed.

I used memoing and a research journal throughout the research process as a way to control for researcher bias and develop theory (Charmaz, 2006). I began writing memos during the data collection process to reflect on the interview process and the potential need for alterations in the interview guides in addition to documenting and evaluating ideas regarding potential theory. I continued to write memos throughout data collection and data analysis in addition to using journaling as a method of examining potential bias and reflexivity throughout the research process. Although I was able to relate to many aspects of the experiences described by participants, being intentionally reflexive allowed me to recognize that my experiences are also different from theirs in a number of ways. In addition to memoing and journaling, I communicated with my supervisor throughout the research process about my own experiences. I chose to do this in order to ensure that the analysis of the data and the findings presented reflect as accurately as possible the experiences communicated by the participants.

The coding scheme followed the coding processes for grounded theory as outlined by Glaser (1978, 1992) and Charmaz (2006). First, I coded data using line-by-line open coding where it was coded in as many ways as possible in order to aid in immersing myself within the data. I attempted to place an emphasis on preserving actions within the codes and used the language of participants within the open coding process when possible. For example, the code “compromising safe space” was developed from a participant, Lennon’s, statement, “I didn't want to compromise that safe space, you know what I mean”. Likewise, the code “hiding” was created to reflect the participants' experiences as closeted athletes because five of the six women chose this word specifically to speak of their experiences while they were closeted. Parker recalled, “I felt like I was hiding a part of myself”. Following open coding, focused (or selective) coding began in order to draw the most frequently occurring and significant codes to the fore and synthesize the data through an iterative process. Finally, theoretical coding was completed in order to link the substantive codes together and integrate them into theory. As suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990), an effort was made to use participants' language within the coding process and the final theory in order to increase the credibility of the findings and ground them in the data collected.

Verification procedures. Walker and Myrick (2006) pointed out that there is an ongoing debate regarding the role of verification within a grounded theory methodology. “Glaser's position is that if you code only for what is in the data allowing for emergence, then verification automatically occurs” (Walker & Myrick, 2006, p. 554). Although I believe this to be the case, I also believe that, as members of a population whose voices are often marginalized, participants should be given the opportunity to have their voices heard and should leave the research process feeling as though their voices are being communicated accurately. In order to ensure this, participants were given the opportunity to review transcripts of their interviews to verify that their experiences were accurately communicated and to expand on those experiences if they wished. One participant contacted me after receiving her interview transcript and indicated that she felt it was complete and accurate. The remaining five participants did not respond after receiving transcribed copies of their interviews. Additionally, I invited participants to read and respond to initial findings from the study as a form of member checking (Charmaz, 2006). I acknowledge that allowing participants to have input into the findings of the study may provide the opportunity for the theory to be altered to some degree; however, the feedback received did not indicate the need for changes to the theory which I developed.

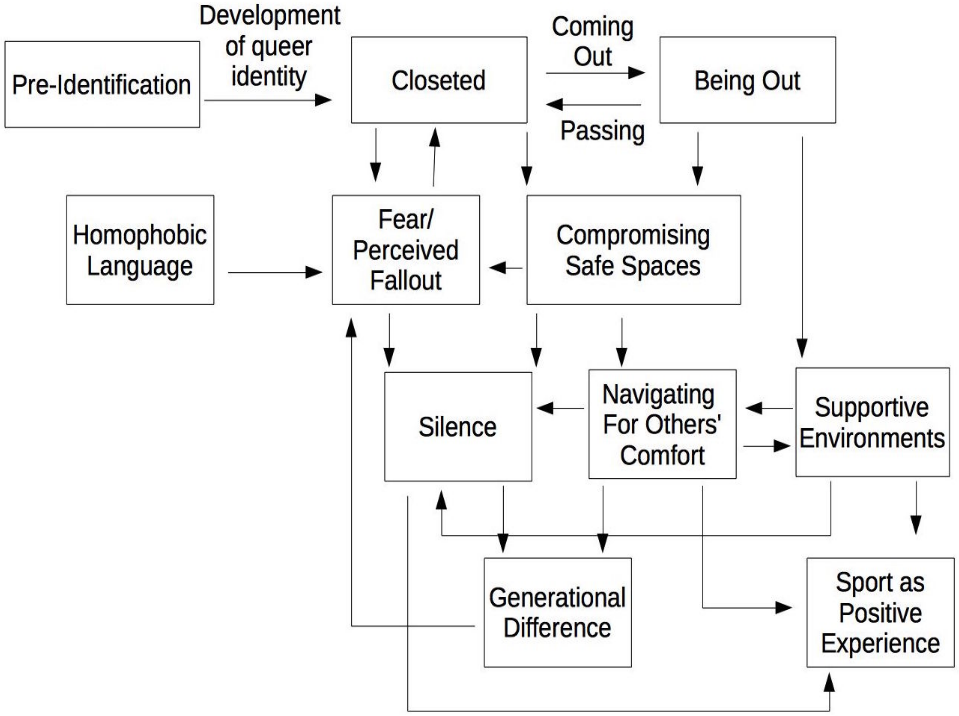
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The two research questions guiding this study were: (a) What are the interpersonal experiences of cis female, bisexual, athletes with teammates, the parents of teammates, and coaching staff within the context of team sport? and, (b) How do cis female, bisexual, athletes make sense of, and ascribe meaning to these interpersonal experiences? Analysis of the data resulted in the finding that the development of a queer identity affected the interpersonal experiences that the participants had within and outside of sport contexts. Prior to questioning their sexual identities, the women described 'normal' or unremarkable sport experiences and interpersonal interactions. Once the women started to question their sexual identities, how they felt about their interpersonal experiences in sport changed significantly. The first theme, ‘Closet as Mediator’, speaks to the experiences of the women prior to the adoption of a queer identity.

After beginning to identify as queer, the participants spoke to ‘Fear and Perceived Fallout’, a theme which I developed, playing a major role in how they interacted with coaches, teammates, and others outside of sport. This fear acted as motivation for all but one of the women to remain closeted within their communities, including to their sport teams. The participants spoke of being aware that, even while closeted, they were ‘Compromising Safe Spaces’ through their presence in change rooms, group showers, and other private spaces in sport. This theme speaks to their awareness of existing stereotypes of those with queer identities; what one participant, Lennon, aptly termed the 'insatiable sexual bisexual' or 'the predatory lesbian trope', where queer individuals are perceived by many to be sexually deviant and predatory. The women managed their identities within interpersonal interactions in three ways: (1) through remaining closeted and/or avoiding disclosing or discussing their sexual identity, a tactic referred to as ‘Silence’; (2) through navigating their interpersonal experiences for the comfort of others, a theme referred to as ‘Navigating for Others' Comfort’; and (3) through finding ‘Supportive Environments’ where team members were perceived to be accepting of their sexual identities. The women noted that they used all three of the above strategies to manage their identities within the context of sport after coming out.

After describing the experiences of the women prior to questioning their sexual identities, I discuss how these themes affected the interpersonal experiences of women when they were closeted and how this was changed once they came out to their teams. The women felt very differently about their experiences as closeted athletes compared to being 'out'. Although they noted that being out was a more positive experience, the ways they managed their identities changed very little with the exception of their seeking out supportive environments once they came out. From here I move to a discussion of the theme ‘Generational Difference’, which pertains to how the women managed their identities with significantly more silence when interacting with members of their parents' and grandparents' generations. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the women's experiences with homophobic language in sport as well as introducing the final theme, ‘Sport as Positive Experience’, where I aim to convey the participants' sentiments regarding their largely positive experiences as bisexual women in sport. This theme speaks to how participants in this study acknowledged their interpersonal experiences in both sport and their communities broadly as positive. The themes and how they interact with one another are presented below in Figure 1, which illustrates how the social experiences of the participants were mediated by their identity development. Additionally, the figure shows how homophobic language, and perceived generational differences in acceptance of bisexuality instilled fear in the participants when they were closeted. The figure also shows how the women were active in the creation of supportive environments on their teams, primarily through silence, which resulted in their positive experiences in sport.

Figure 1


Pre-Identification
Development of queer identity
Closeted
Coming Out
Passing
Being Out
Homophobic Language
Fear/ Perceived Fallout
Compromising Safe Spaces
Silence
Navigating For Others' Comfort
Supportive Environments
Generational Difference
Sport as Positive Experience

Closet as Mediator

One of the findings of this study was that the participants’ process of identity development and coming out to their communities affected their experiences in sport and other social contexts. Prior to identifying as bisexual, pansexual, or 'not straight', the women recounted not feeling like their experiences in sport were noteworthy. After they began to question their sexual identities, it appears as though their experiences changed significantly. Initially, they concealed their identity from others while looking for social feedback regarding the level of acceptance of others with queer identities in their communities. This chapter includes information pertaining to the experiences of the women prior to their questioning of their sexual identity (‘Pre-Identification’) as well as their experiences as they began questioning their identities (‘Questioning Sexual Identity’).

Pre-identification. The closet appears to be a continuum where the participants were out to varying degrees. Initially, they were closeted to themselves, unaware that they were bisexual, unaware that bisexuality existed, and/or unwilling to identify as something other than straight. Once aware of their identities all but one continued to pass as straight for a significant period of time. The women who continued to pass as straight appeared to be motivated primarily by fear and remained closeted until they moved away from their hometowns. Additionally, some women spoke about coming out as being an ongoing process, meaning that they were never completely out of the closet. Lennon expressed frustration around this idea and how those with whom she engages make assumptions about her identity,

> I always kind of thought of like coming out as like this one time thing, you know what I mean like, “oh I'm going to come out in first year [of university] and everyone will know and it'll be beautiful and I'll be sitting in class and they'll be like, “oh that [Lennon], I remember when she came out”; and like that's not it at all. It's just this continual process and at some point I just kind of got tired of it.

She explained what caused her to feel tired,

> It's like when I tell someone and they have that moment of surprise, and sometimes they don't even say anything; but you can just tell that they're a little taken aback and there's this like stutter moment and they'd be like “[breath catches] yeah for sure”. Like they're trying to be cool and they are cool, but it's just not there yet. I think the moment of surprise just like grates on me because it reminds you that you're not normal, you know what I mean; “*normal”* [in air quotes].

Where an individual falls on the continuum of being in the closet and in their process of identity formation seems to mediate their experience within team sport. Payton spoke to this idea in discussing her experience as a figure skater, an activity that she participated in until after her first year of university. She recollected feeling more tense as she participated as a closeted athlete, although she was publicly 'out' on social media. She recalled, “I was out while I was in university, but a lot of them [teammates] I think didn't actually know that [laughter]; so it was always kind of awkward”. This experience speaks to the idea that a queer individual is not 'out' until those they interact with are aware of their identity. Although Payton took a very public step to ensure that those she interacted with were aware of her identity, she was not certain about who was aware of it because it was never discussed during her participation in synchronized skating. She recalled,

> I was out to the extent that if someone looked me up on Facebook they would've know; but people [her team], I wasn't very very close with them. There were some people that I think knew; but a lot of them were, for example, they were surprised when I started dating [name] my wife, because she she actually skated on the synchro team the year after [laughter]. So when we when we got together people were surprised at that because they hadn't known that I was queer, that I liked women. I think they were more surprised about me than they were about her.

Here she also speaks to her observation that people were more aware of her wife's lesbian identity than they were of her own bisexual identity. Perhaps this was due, in part, to her experience of people being disbelieving of her bisexual identity and her commitment to her wife, a point discussed later in this chapter.

Quinn, a competitive soccer player, reminisced about how she felt until she realized that her peers did not experience attraction in the same way as she did. Again, this realization seemed to affect her experience in sport:

> I think that's when I really realized that I kinda identified as something other than straight – I didn't know what I was – and I didn't know that there was anything other than lesbian and gay or transgender; like I [had] never seen anything outside of that. But I knew I was something other than straight. [Before] I just

> thought like I was like everyone else so I was just like super happy then once I got to that age [17 or 18] I was just like “no, there's something different about you”.

She went on to explain how this sat with her, “I was really scared and just being different from everyone else came along with a lot of consequences like losing friends and not being in the right crowd”.

Another woman spoke about a relatively 'normal' experience in sport during high school. Her interview was excluded from data analysis because she had no current involvement in sport and had no experience to draw on as a self-identified bisexual athlete as she did not self-identify at the time when she participated in sport. However, her experience supports the notion that being closeted to oneself does moderate one's experience.

Once the women realized that they were attracted to other women, they became closeted and their interpersonal experiences in sport changed. They became concerned about being 'discovered' as being different and fearful of being socially ostracized and judged.

Questioning sexual identity. Most women expressed their initially uncertainty of their identity and needed time to figure out their sexual identity. Lennon recalled,

> When I was about 15; probably that was my whole like realization that I wasn't just an overly invested ally. 'Cause that was my whole thing, I was like, 'awe like I'm not gay, but I really support everything they do'.

Here she spoke of being involved in the LGBTTQQIAAP community originally as an 'ally' or straight identifying supporter before she began to question her own sexual identity.

Alex conveyed a similar sentiment in speaking about how she identified as straight, rather than addressing her feelings of attraction towards females, “it was easier to say [to myself] I'm just attracted to males and not actually address the fact that I knew I was attracted to females”.

The women spoke about looking back and seeing clues to their identity, but not necessarily knowing that they were 'different' at the time. They talked about needing to 'figure out' their sexuality and having limited information about bisexuality or identities other than gay or heterosexual. Payton demonstrated this as she recalled a process of becoming educated before she drew conclusions about her identity,

> It wasn't really until high school where I started to get more knowledge of the world that I started to, to really explore my feelings about the issue and kind of, um start to draw some conclusions. And I would say... by the time I was 15, I knew for sure; I was hesitant to tell people though.

Logan spoke to this gap in knowledge as well, not necessarily knowing that bisexuality was an option,

> It was a lot harder for me to figure myself out when I kinda thought 'okay well I must be this'. I think it would have been much easier for me if I'd been more aware that this is, you know, that there is another option.

She went on to explain a situation that she found herself in during high school when she was attracted to a female, which led her to assume that she was lesbian.

> There was also a guy I liked at the time who asked me out, and I actually turned him down in like grade 10 or 11 I think because I decided I was like, 'no no no I like a girl so I'm clearly a lesbian'.

It appears that several of the women struggled to develop non-monosexual identities because they had no access to examples where they could see that such a possibility exists. Regardless of the reason, once the women began identifying as non-heterosexual, they recalled a shift in their experiences in sport. Interestingly, it was not specifically a bisexual or pansexual identity that appeared to be a factor influencing their social experiences. Rather, it was their positioning as individuals who no longer identified as 'straight' that seemed to affect their experiences initially.

Fear and Perceived Fallout

The realization that something was 'different' seemed to affect the interpersonal experiences of the women both in sport, and in other social contexts. I developed the theme, “Fear and Perceived Fallout”, to describe what appeared to be a common experience for the participants after they became aware that they were not heterosexual.

The women in the study typically spoke about the experience of being closeted with a very different tone compared to that of being unaware of their minority sexual identity. The participants spoke about navigating interpersonal interactions by avoiding the subject in attempts to 'hide' because of their fear. Payton recalled, “after I did put two and two together I was kind of really nervous about coming out. I was more afraid of being caught looking at people than anything else”. Quinn remembered, “at the end of grade 11 grade 12, that's when I was like hiding the most and when I was absolutely terrified. I kept a lot of things to myself. I just didn't want anything at all to slip out”. Lennon conveyed a similar sentiment:

> In high school I dealt with it by just not telling anyone; 'cause if no one found out then it wasn't real. Which was fine like it's one of those things that, like looking back it was shitty, but at the time that was just what everyone did. So it didn't matter like everyone just kept that on the down low.

Quinn built on this when she spoke about the idea of talking about her identity with other people during her high school years,

> I think it would have meant that it was real or something, and at the time I didn't want it to be real. I was still scared. I didn't want to be this way. And if it was real that means all of these things that I thought were going to happen would happen.

With the exception of Parker, the realization that the women were 'different' from their peers was accompanied by a certain level of fear when interacting with others. The participants spoke about 'hiding' because they were afraid of what the fallout would be if their peers found out about their identity. They spoke of seeing how their already 'out' LGBT peers were treated and being fearful of finding themselves in a similar position. Payton explained,

> In high school I wasn't really out yet. That was something I was keeping really quiet because I was in a rural community and like it was a fairly okay environment, but only until you actually came out; at which point, you know, we had students that came out and would shortly thereafter have to transfer schools because it was just really difficult for them to stay.

Parker spoke of the fallout after she came out to both her teammates on her community soccer team and within her high school,

> People who were not my teammates were a lot less accepting I would find; and so like being out in high school, I found like I got a lot of guys who'd say, 'hey do you want to come have a threesome with me and my girlfriend?' like 'uh nooo'.

She later explained,

> In high school there's a lot more discrimination than on my team. My team as a whole was very accepting. The people in my high school were not, as a whole, although there were accepting individuals, there's also a lot of hate that came my way because of my identity.

All of the women spoke of finding accepting team environments after coming out to their teammates. Prior to coming out, they looked for signals regarding the climate toward queer individuals.

Social exclusion and judgement.

There were two common concerns the women spoke about surrounding their fear of coming out. The one that seemed to have the greatest effect on their decision to stay closeted was a concern regarding tangible negative consequences, the fear of being 'outcast', while a second concern pertained to the idea of being judged by others. Alex recollected her high school experience,

> I had viewed, when I was in high school, that those people that were out and okay with their identity had been outcasted. Most of them weren't overtly attacked; some of them were. I do very clearly remember [when] walking

> through [the school] someone calling someone a fag when I was in grade 8.

This type of memorable example of the perceived social climate towards sexual minorities seemed common amongst the participants. Alex continued,

> I had seen that action and seen how people had outcasted them, and another action was, there was a female in my grade who had openly talked about how she was bisexual and when she openly stated to a female just outside my friend group that she was attracted to her, she like overtly outcasted her, and gossiped about how she was attracted to females, and how she thought that was so inappropriate.

She later clarified what she thought would have happened if she had come out to her rowing team in high school, “I feel like, from other females, it would have been a lot of exclusion like, and gossip”.

The fear around being outcast was not only about social isolation, but also a fear of being the target for verbal and physical abuse by peers. Quinn described her experience in her hometown before she moved away to attend university,

> Back home it was really... it was pretty scary and very judgmental. And like, there were other girls that were coming out and they were being threatened by guys who I considered *my* friends. They were just like, they were saying like things about, I don't know, she was just like worth nothing; they would just like say like really bad things and even, like talking about, I don't want to say assaulting her, but that's what it was was like assaulting her like they were threatening to like, I would say, beat her up. I guess that would be the term that I

> would rather use.

She went on to explain the effect of this experience in talking about leaving high school and moving to attend university and compete as a varsity athlete,

> It was absolutely... it was the most terrifying couple months of my entire life 'cause I was just scared. It was like my first year being on the university team, I worked so hard to get there and I didn't want to lose it; and that's what I thought would happen. I thought I would get a lot of disadvantages out of that [coming out]; because I didn't know any gay or bisexual athletes at the time. There was no one for me to take an example off of, so, I was just scared that I was going to lose everything that I worked for. So I even thought about hiding it for at least a year or something; like, figure things out on my own, but I had a couple friends on the team that I immediately became close to and one of them was actually gay. I was like, 'okay you're a lesbian and you're an athlete, how can you help me out here?'... I saw that people were accepting of her and they didn't really care; all they cared about was the fact that she was working hard.

In much the same way that observing the negative experiences of others affected her, the positive experiences of her peer, whom she was able to obtain support from, helped Quinn to feel less scared and to ultimately be okay with being out to her team.

Both Logan and Quinn appeared to hold their athletic pursuits as central components of their identities, Quinn as an athlete, and Logan as both an athlete and a coach. Lennon and Payton made reference to having similar sentiments in the past; although at the time of their interviews they no longer identified as 'athletes'. The women who identified as athletes and who held their athletic pursuits as central to their identity seemed to experience a higher level of concern regarding their teams finding out about their sexual identity. Perhaps the higher level of concern was because they feared that they would no longer be able to participate in their sport – potentially resulting in the loss of a central component of their identity.

In addition to fear of being outcast, the women were also concerned about being judged. Logan spoke about the period before coming out to her teammates, “obviously at first I was concerned about all kinds of things being, you know, judged or whatever”. Parker echoed as she explained why she did not come out to her coaches, even after coming out to teammates, “I guess like one, I felt it didn't concern them, and two, I didn't want to be judged for it”. When asked what the result of that judgement would have been, she explained, “Well, it would have felt pretty shitty; I would have felt awkward so that would have sucked”. She continued to express that she likely would have wanted to attend less frequently if she had felt judged. Additionally, Parker indicated that she was more hesitant to disclose her identity when her coach was also a parent compared to when her coach was not the parent of a team member[3].

In contrast, Quinn spoke about her experience after coming out to her teammates:

> It's like a weight that's just completely lifted off my shoulders and I can just be myself and I can speak my voice without feeling like I'm going to be judged. And *that's* what I felt like beforehand; I felt like I was constantly judged and I didn't want to talk about anything cause I didn't want to let anything slip. It was just an

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[3] I discuss perceived generational differences in the acceptance of queer identities later in this chapter.

> absolutely terrifying part of my life. Now it's like I can actually go to my full potential cause I know I'm not going to be judged. I know I'm going to be supported in everything that I do because the girls are awesome, my coach is awesome; but I didn't think that way when I was back home and my friends weren't supportive and they weren't supportive of the LGBT community.

In much the same way as they spoke of gauging the climate towards sexual minorities within their schools, the women told stories of observing what they perceived to be examples of the team climate in their sport towards queer individuals. Although the women noted experiencing gay slurs (which they perceived as being said with malice) and casual homophobic language (which they perceived as being said without intent to harm), more often than not they spoke about a more complex experience of homo/biphobia and othering. I address the concept that there is a difference between how gay slurs and casual homophobic language are interpreted and perceived by athletes in the following chapter.

Alex recalled remaining closeted on one of her rugby teams because she perceived a negative climate towards LGBT individuals:

> There wasn't direct homophobic slurs in terms of that rugby team but people overtly stating that they felt uncomfortable changing in front of these people because they might be looking at them, or stating something about how they thought that this person's orientation was not straight and then going, 'oh she's weird'.

Lennon, spoke about a memorable interaction with a female teammate to whom she was closeted as a young adult,

> So we were sitting in the sauna and she was just talking about, I don't know exactly how it came up, but she was talking about all these different like sexualities and stuff and she was like, 'you know what like I just think that this is all like pretty much bullshit like like you're either straight or you're gay and that's like pretty much it; like everyone else just hasn't made up their minds'.

These types of experiences acted as signals to the women regarding the climate of their team in terms of being accepting of LGBT individuals. After her interaction with a teammate in the sauna, Lennon recounted how she felt unable to come out after 'committing' to a straight identity by not coming out during a discussion of minority sexual identities,

> It's actually something that I've like thought back on a lot where it was like: a) well I'm not going to come out on the team now, even though like I know that not everyone is like her and blah blah blah. But it just kind of felt [like] I'd committed to this role you know what I mean, and once I'd committed to it like I couldn't get out of it, 'gotta quit the team.' That wasn't why I quit the team but [laughter].

It is interesting that Lennon felt like she could not come out to her teammates after this interaction. Saying nothing in this situation may have been difficult because it left her closeted to her team and made her feel like she had to remain closeted to them lest she be viewed as deceptive or predatory.

In speaking about how she navigated her teen years, Payton said,

> When it's in a group setting, it could be, you just kinda keep your head down ‘cause you don't want to call attention to yourself and invite questions about your sexuality and stuff. Because you know then you have to make a choice on whether or not you just straight out deny it or, you know, how do you evade that kind of question? And I was sort of like on the cusp of coming out, like if someone had asked me outright, I probably would have. I didn't want to have to deny myself, but, I wasn't just going to step forward and do it [come out] at that level because I was afraid of kinda the fallout of that.

She went on the explain,

> I was afraid of the social impacts; I was already sort of on the outskirts socially of my class, um, because I didn't relate well to most of the students. And the group of people that I'd hang out with were typically kind of ostracized. We were kind of on the social outskirts already, and I was sort of afraid of what the fallout might be if I were to come out at that at that school, and how that would impact my life.

The fallout that Payton spoke of was mentioned by many of the other women, most notable were Quinn's fear of being 'beat up' and losing her position within her friend group of athletes and Alex's concern about being 'outcast'. The fear of the social consequences of coming out seemed to be the major factor that most of the women considered in choosing to stay closeted while in high school.

Silence

All but one of the women initially coped with the development of their bisexual identity by trying to keep it hidden, remaining closeted until they moved away from their communities to attend university. It is unclear why Parker chose to come out to her teammates right away, when she first identified as bisexual at 14 years old, but she offered the following explanation,

> I think, like when I was that age, I was super bold and I had this perspective like, everyone needs to know. And so I just felt like I needed to tell everybody. Now I don't feel like I need to tell people unless it comes up. But at the time I just, yeah, I just wanted to tell everyone; so I did, and that's kinda how that went down.

Parker seemed less worried about the ramifications that the other women spoke of because she had friends whom she was confident would be supportive of her. She noted that her teammates were less judgmental than her peers in school.

The remaining women gave many reasons for their silence. Both Lennon and Quinn spoke of their silence as a method of making their identities less 'real'. Alex and Payton also expressed similar concerns, noting that they initially hesitated to acknowledge their bisexual identities as 'real'. Logan and Lennon both spoke to their silence within a sport context being the result of an interaction with a teammate. Logan recalled,

> I decided I was not gonna come out at that point, and that probably delayed it by like three years. Actually, when I was in grade ten (inaudible word) teammate like, who I'm sure didn't even think about it, uh, we were just chatting about like

> different people we'd wrestled at tournaments right and she [stated], 'oh my god guys, like I wrestled a lesbian once, like I wrestled her and then afterwards I saw her like making out with some girl. Whoa just like, that's so weird, like what if she liked me?' And I'm like 'no,' right. And this was when I was like first, you know, working these things out. That one, that one stuck with me for [a] bunch of years. There were a few little moments like that.

Remaining closeted through high school seemed to be perceived by the women as a way to retain their relationships with friends, teammates, and family members while avoiding social isolation in their communities.

Compromising Safe Spaces

Within a sport context, the women seemed to be concerned about interacting with others in what Lennon called a 'safe space', where physical contact and close relationships with other females are acceptable; all of the women spoke to this theme in some regard. Safe spaces included locations such as changing rooms, hotel rooms (during team travel), and other contexts where teammates might be in varying states of undress. The safe spaces that the women spoke about were not necessarily spaces where they felt safe, rather, they were spaces where they were cognizant of their teammates' experiences. The participants in my study sought to protect their teammates' experiences of safety despite their not necessarily feeling the same sense of security amongst their teams. Lennon recalled instances that made her uncomfortable as a bisexual athlete,

> Well definitely anything involving like changing your clothes kind of thing, 'cause there's this whole trope of like the predatory lesbian, or like the insatiable

sexual bisexual. This whole idea that like if you're attracted to women like you're going to be preying on them twenty-four sev. [seven]. And I think that just kind of comes to the forefront the most any time there's like changing, or any sport involving like wearing fewer clothes. I intentionally didn't sign up for um, water polo, because we're all going to be changing in this women's change room, and like, we're all going to be wearing swim suits, and it's not that like you know, 'and I don't think I can handle myself,' like that's definitely not the case. But it's just like I don't want to make people uncomfortable; not saying that like that's my problem, but also like, why would I put anyone in that situation? Which, it kinda sucks knowing that you have the power to make someone uncomfortable just by the virtue of who you are, but that's something I always try to be really careful about. And that was something I was really conscious of like on the wrestling team; it was part of the reason I didn't tell people. 'Cause we had a small girls team, there were just 3 or 4 of us, um and like, we all got changed and showered in the same change room; and I didn't want to compromise that safe space. You know what I mean, because you know I didn't want it to be one of those like, 'oh my god she's been checking us out this whole time like this is why she didn't tell us before'. Yeah, and so that's probably like, one of the most, like, othering moments, you know what I mean? Where you're like, yeah like, 'they can do this all normally and like I can do it normally too but they're going to think that I can't.' And that makes me uncomfortable because I feel like I'm making them uncomfortable…

The stereotype of queer people as sexual predators or sexually 'insatiable' is one that all but one of the women seemed to be aware of, at least to the extent that they did not want to be perceived as 'checking out' or being attracted to their teammates or opponents.

Logan had first-hand experience of the effects of the stereotype of queer individuals as sexual predators. She recalled an experience where she developed a close relationship with one of the teenage athletes she was coaching. Her athlete was struggling in her personal life and turned to her coach for support, but the close relationship that they developed was deemed to be inappropriate by the athlete's mother. Logan recalled,

> I don't even know how her mother knew that I was gay, I didn't tell her personally, but I also didn't hide it from her. Anyway, she knew. Somebody told her. And basically she ended up accusing me of a lot of horrible horrible things with her daughter; and ended up telling, about a year ago, that if I contacted her daughter again, she was going to sue me for um, like for sexual harassment [laughter]. And like accused me of all sorts of things that were just totally made up. Some of them not sexual. I'm not even sure to this day if she thinks, or at least her accusation was that, I had already done something with her daughter or just that I wanted to. But yeah, basically that turned into a *huge* thing where I almost had to call a lawyer and she called Child Services. Oh, and she screamed in the middle of the national tournament; screaming, loudly causing commotion, people in the bleachers playing attention, and calling me a dyke and a cunt.

She continued,

> That was, uh, obviously really hard. I mean, I ended up having a complete break down; like failed my courses and things. It definitely made me think for the first time in several years about; do I want to try to keep this hidden? Is it [being bisexual] going to hurt me? Especially since I want a career working with high school kids once I finish, doing this degree. I love, love working with high school kids and obviously even an accusation like that can destroy any chance of a career. I hadn't thought there'd be no time when I thought about mentioning my identity, but it definitely made me think about it; made me nervous. I very much like the principle of, 'I don't care what you're going to threaten me with, I'm going to keep coming out cause it can make a difference'. But it, yeah, it did legitimately scare me a lot; it can screw up your whole life.

None of the women wanted to be perceived as 'checking out' or being attracted to a female teammate. Payton stated,

> As a queer woman you're kind of always, you wonder a bit with some people that-if they're uncomfortable with you being around in those kind of situations. That response that you get from some straight people is that they're just worried that the queer people in their lives are out for them.

She explained that, in order to alleviate this fear, she and her wife would make an announcement to their teammates when attempting to find roommates for a hotel room,

> We always provide a disclaimer of like, 'we promise not to have sex in the bed next to you'. We've always been able to find people to room with us, so it's again, like it's really refreshing because I was nervous about that initially, and I think

> [my wife] was as well; that people would be concerned about sharing a room with us. You know, people are totally fine with it, and if they aren't fine with it they just don't say anything and they room with someone else.

Logan and Payton both spoke of their sports (wrestling and roller derby) as being challenging in this regard. Payton explained,

> We try and just make sure there's no surprises about it; because I find if you catch people off guard, you're more likely to maybe bring out the underlying heterosexism and homophobia that they don't even know is there. But if you catch 'em off guard with it sometimes then it becomes- they start thinking back on all the situations you've been in and all of the times that you've touched their butt; because that's just like part of roller derby right your hands are always around other people's hips. And so just to keep them from developing those feelings after the fact we let them know ahead of time. Because touching other people is the reality of our sport, it's a contact sport [laughter] it happens. It happens intentionally, it happens otherwise, like, it's just part of it.

Alex was the only woman who spoke of first-hand experience with teammates who were overtly expressive about their discomfort. She recalled, “in change rooms there was issues, and people made overt comments about not feeling comfortable changing in front of certain people based on [sexual] orientation and stuff like that”.

Even though Alex was the only woman to have experience with teammates expressing their discomfort, the participants took steps to avoid provoking such a response. Both Logan and Lennon expressed similar sentiments regarding such compensation. Both articulated their concern about how their participation in wrestling would be perceived by others in their sport as sexual or predatory. Logan wasn't concerned about being sexually inappropriate, rather,

> It's more that *I* don't want to have to worry about that; like, if I'm practicing with you I don't want to have to have it in my head that like, 'oh shit, if I do this then, you know, is it going to seem like, I'm you know?'

Quinn was the only women who did not discuss a concern pertaining to compromising safe spaces in sport. She described her experience on her current team,

> It's awesome [laughter], they're so great. And honestly, they're like 26 of my best friends and, I just, it doesn't matter. Like honestly, it doesn't matter on the field and it doesn't matter, like in our group of friends, it's awesome that I'm bisexual and this is what they say.

She continued,

> They were super supportive, and I think it's more talked about now than it was at the very beginning. 'Cause obviously I'm more comfortable with it and now I can actually talk about it. So yeah, it's pretty open now. The girls are awesome and honestly like whenever it comes to like, thanking the girls, I couldn't thank them enough; 'cause honestly like, I don't know what I would have done if they weren't supportive or anything like that and I don't know who I would have been now. I think I'm a more confident person because of them; and, and more outgoing and all that.

Yet, even with a highly supportive team, Quinn noted that she didn't really speak to her soccer teammates about her attraction to other females,

> Like 99% of them are straight, so it's hard to be like, I can't really say, 'oh that girl's hot,' or something. Like, that's nothing that I would really do anyway, but like I can't. I feel a little bit more hesitant to talk about the relationships that I've had with girls; because I don't know really where they are. I just know that they're supportive of me, I'm not sure what they're like about the LGBT community; although evidence has already been shown that they're quite alright with it. But, I just don't want to put them in that awkward position.

Quinn's hesitance could be interpreted as an unconscious attempt to avoid being seen as compromising the safe space on her team or, more simply, an attempt to avoid eliciting homophobic reactions from her friends. Either interpretation involves her making a decision about her interpersonal interactions with the comfort of teammates in mind, an idea which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Supportive Environments

The theme “Supportive Environments” relates to the current experiences of the participants on their teams; the women spoke of having a more positive experience after coming out to their teammates. Alex spoke of her interactions with a teammate on her rugby team as being the impetus for questioning her identity, “prior to being on that team I hadn't been so immersed in a community that was so overt and okay with who they were”. Quinn and Logan both articulated how their experiences in their sports changed after coming out. Quinn explained,

> Coming to terms with who I was made me realize so many things about myself;

> made me confident, and just translated to something on the field. I was more confident, I was more vocal, I was willing to try more things - like just in terms of like playing around with the ball or something. It made me a more confident person; I think just realizing more about myself kind of facilitated that.

Logan recalled what it felt like to be closeted to her team:

> I was concerned that if I like came out it would make a difference. And at that time I was keeping my mouth shut just because I didn't want anyone to know about me. I was imagining, like if I do say something, then I'll, you know, they'll see me differently. Since I've come out and I don't feel like anyone sees me differently, I don't feel that way anymore.

Each of the women had a story about coming out to teammates. Lennon and Payton, spoke of changing the type of sport that they were involved in; during that shift they started to be out within other contexts. Because they were already out when they started their new sport, their teammates had always been aware of their identities. Alex spoke of having a teammate question her identity and later coming out to other supportive individuals on her team. Logan came out to the majority of her team when she was directly questioned about her sexual orientation during an informal poll during a social gathering, while Parker came out to all of her teammates as soon as she started identifying as bisexual. Quinn recalled coming out to a lesbian player initially, but that she never actually came out to the other members of her team,

> I never really came out being like, 'hey guys, I'm bisexual'. It kinda just, it just kinda became known; I have no idea how, still to this day I don't know how

> everybody found out. 'Cause I never said it out loud - unless, like, the other girls may have said something and was just like, 'maybe don't talk to her about it'. I was absolutely scared at the time; but I think other people finding out just on their own and stuff, and not talking to me about it, making it seem like it didn't really matter, and all they cared about was how hard I worked and that I was a good teammate. I think that made it, really, it was probably like the best way that I could've come out I guess. Because I was very uncomfortable with it at the time, and I think I needed to come into terms with it with myself. But yeah, so it wasn't really, there wasn't really like a coming out moment.

Quinn did not know who on her team knew of her sexual identity, but because she had started working with an advocacy group to draw attention to the use of casual homophobic language within sport, she was confident that all of her teammates were aware that she was not straight. Her experience also spoke to the idea that one is not 'out' until others are aware of their identity; further, it was her perception that others knew about her sexual identity that seemed to be important to her experience.

When speaking about their experiences in sport after coming out or, being outed to their teams, the women articulated that their sexuality 'just doesn't come up' as that component of their identity is not related to their performance. Alex stated, “it usually doesn't play a large part in actually participating; meaning it's just a part of who I am, it's not usually pointed out”. Lennon articulated similar sentiments, “like you're playing a sport, like it's not really the time to be like, 'oh hey, by the way, I'm bisexual; like, like no one gives a shit and, like, now you've made it weird”. It is possible that this is what

Lennon was referring to when she stated that it would be 'weird'. It appears as though the women and their teams continued to use silence as a way to prevent discomfort. Perhaps the lack of discussion on the topic allowed team members to avoid potential conflict. Alex, however, was the only woman to speak directly to such a situation,

> I decided I wanted to play rugby, so I joined a team. The team was very cliquey and very overtly a bunch of people stated that they were um very much against people with- oh yeah, I guess I completely forgot that I did *not,* in that situation, [laughter] talk about my sexual orientation. Because they very overtly stated that they were not okay with the fact that this one player was, well they stated lesbian, but who knows cause she didn't say it herself. So it was all hearsay, um, [I] remember being very *very* offended by that, and then just didn't return the next year. And [I] hadn't made relationships with anyone on the team, so didn't feel like I could overtly call people out on the fact that they were being homophobic.

An environment where team members avoided the subject of queer identities would have likely been perceived by Alex to be more accepting and hospitable in comparison to her experience with overtly homophobic remarks. She recalled how her experience on the rugby team affected her,

> I didn't buy into trying to create any relationship with anybody on the team; because I didn't feel like it was worth it. I didn't feel like I was welcomed, I didn't like, I didn't want to deal with it.

As discussed through the theme “Fear and Perceived Fallout,” all of the women were aware of the potential social consequences of discussing their sexual identities with others. They recalled experiences of, and more often, of observing how others could react and harm individuals with queer identities. As Payton noted in an earlier excerpt, “I find if you catch people off guard, you're more likely to maybe bring out the underlying heterosexism and homophobia that they don't even know is there”.

It is noteworthy that many of the women attributed their current positive experiences in sport to the type of sport in which they were involved. After noting that her sexual identity did not play a large role in her current sport participation, Alex, who is currently involved in roller derby and has played rugby in the past noted,

> I believe that [my experience] is probably based on the sports that I've chosen to be involved in, and knowing that they are communities in which queer people would likely be attracted to. I could be wrong but that's my assumption.

However, she also noted earlier that she had a negative experience where she remained closeted to her teammates because of the homophobic climate of one rugby team. This suggests that although some types of sports may be perceived to be more accepting of queer participants, the people involved also contribute to the level of acceptance and support experienced.

Payton, also involved in roller derby, elaborated on this sentiment that some sports are more accepting,

> There's a lot of stereotypes about what kind of people would want to play derby, that you're going to be, a) that there's going to be a lot of queers which is fairly true but I think that's sort of like causation, 'cause like a lot of queer people come

> to derby because they know that it's a sport that they're going to be treated well in; that they're less likely to be met with homophobia. We get a lot of people who are on the outskirts socially.

Both Alex and Payton were quick to discuss their positive experience in the sport of roller derby and encouraged the interviewer, as well as anyone who has had a negative experience in other sports, to become involved. Payton noted,

> The community of the sport is very different from any other sport I've ever experienced in my life; I've never been socially in a group outside of like literally a queer support group that is so supportive of queers [laughter]. So because of that I've had a really positive experience playing roller derby. There are queer skaters and people are very supportive of that, and expected to be supportive of that, and that's very open. It's like in our bylaws, it's something that the coaches talk about and address at practice, especially with the newcomers; it's the culture of derby and it's what's accepted in derby, and you know even like the WFTDA [Women's Flat Track Derby Association] regulatory body has policies around it. Even though that's governed on a league-by-league basis. A lot of sports would at the very least, at that kind of level, they would just pretend like it wasn't going to be an issue. Having them acknowledge that these are things that come up and that you know leagues need to be prepared in advance to handle it, it makes it a very comfortable place to be, more so than anywhere else I think I've ever been.

This suggests that the creation and discussion of explicit policies regarding the treatment of LGBTTQQIAAP team members may be a more positive alternative to 'pretending like it wasn't going to be an issue' and dealing with the presence of queer athletes through silence.

Generational Differences

I constructed the theme “Generational Differences” in response to the participants' accounts of being more guarded about their sexual identity when interacting with members of their parents' and grandparents' generations. Although homophobia and heterosexism, and conversely, support and acceptance, can be present in members of any generation, the women seemed to use their experiences with their parents and grandparents as references regarding the level of acceptance and support that they could expect from members these generations. Most of the women mentioned that their parents had become more accepting and supportive after their initial coming out, which was typically received with a relative lack of understanding and support. Payton was the lone exception to this, as her mother was accepting of queer identities even before her daughter came out to her. Several of the women spoke about a generational difference as being the reason that their parents' and/or grandparents' generation appears to struggle more than their peers do with their bisexual identities. Lennon shared, “I think it's partly like a generational thing, 'cause they [her peers] all have friends who are gay [or] queer, so it's like a non-issue there, they're like, more than happy to talk about it”. In speaking about the transgender youth that she works with, Parker explained, “their own age group is a lot better at accepting that [their gender identity] than parents and teachers and things, or coaches”. When asked why she thought this was, she said,

> I think it wasn't much of a thing when my grandparents and parents were

> growing up; so like people came out maybe as gay, but not necessarily bisexual, and certainly not as transgender; and now all of a sudden there's this younger generation who are like, bisexual and pansexual or queer, which they thought was a bad word, and all of these other things and it's like a lot to take in.

Quinn, when speaking about the parents of her teammates and how they might feel about her and her sexual identity, stated,

> I don't really know what their take is on what they believe; so I'm not quite sure if it would affect them or not. Because they're older I would assume that, because of the way they were brought up, they could think a certain way about me.

The women framed their understanding of where members of older generations are coming from, in part, based on their interactions with parents and grandparents. Quinn spoke about how she does not speak to her parents at all about her sexuality even though she is out to them,

> That's just the way that they were raised, and we had a really rough time when I came out. They were so uncomfortable; my mom and [dad] can't even even watch gay people, men or women, on screen kissing; like they just can't do it, that's just the way that they were raised; and so I choose not do that [talk about sexual identity] with my mom cause I know she is *so* uncomfortable with it.

Quinn went on to explain how this affects her interactions with her mother around her sexuality,

> Like no matter who I'm with, she was super supportive of my relationship with a girl; just because I was happy. But I think the whole concept in general just

> terrifies her; and she just doesn't know anything about it [laughter]. That's just how she was raised, so in order to make her feel comfortable I just don't talk about it with her.

Parker recalled remaining closeted to a coach as an adolescent because a teammate indicated that he would not be accepting,

> So my one teammate's dad coached for a season and whenever we'd have sleepovers she said never to tell him or I wouldn't be allowed to sleep over anymore. She explained, it was like okay, cause I was kinda like dating her [teammate's] younger sister. So, [laughter], I don't know, it was fine.

When the women were closeted, they drew the conclusion that people of an older generation would lack understanding and would be less likely than their peers to be accepting of their bisexual identity. Interactions with their own parents and grandparents as well as conversations with peers about the level of acceptance of their parents led the women to this conclusion. Both Lennon and Logan spoke of their coaches in a similar regard. Lennon recalled,

> It definitely would have been a problem for [name of wresting coach]. Not like a 'kick you off the team' problem, but like, 'I don't know how to deal with this and so I'm going to deal with it in a way that's going to make everyone uncomfortable' kind of thing. Like when people make like jokes because they're really uncomfortable with something so they're like “yeah ehhh!” and you're like “oh god please stop”

Logan spoke of a similar experience, but noted that her coach's ignorance worked to discredit him amongst team members,

> Actually we had one coach who used to use terms like that as an insult and things. That made a bit of a difference, but it almost helped that that guy was also just known for being a huge asshole and nobody listened to him. That almost helped just in that that guy was a joke to most of my teammates. It kind of reinforced the message that saying that kinda stuff is not okay and is not accepted by the community. But yeah, so that one would be the big one that stuck with me.

It is interesting that Logan noted this experience as having an impact on her even though her coach's behaviour served to discredit him within her team. Perhaps this speaks to the influential role that a coach can have within the lives of their athletes. Even when their perspectives are not accepted by their athletes and their views are discredited, those perspectives still have the power and ability to cause harm.

Several of the women noted that the parents of high school teammates would likely not have been accepting of their sexual identities had they been out, but after high school, the parents of teammates did not appear to be important factors to the participants' sport experience. Lennon and Quinn both noted that they did not have much experience with the parents of teammates after high school.

Although the women assumed that their teammates were 'cool' with their bisexual identities because no one stated anything to the contrary, they did not apply the same assumption to older adults. Even after coming out, the women continued to hold the belief that their parents and others in their parents’ generation, such as coaches, were generally uncomfortable with their identity.

Navigating for Others' Comfort

Throughout their experiences in sport, regardless of where they were in their process of identity development, the women spoke with concern about the comfort of others; although none addressed the issue as eloquently as Lennon when she discussed the power she possessed to make people uncomfortable simply, “by the virtue of who you are”. Most of the women seemed to navigate their interpersonal experiences for the comfort of those around them without being fully conscious of doing so. Quinn did not speak with her teammates about her attraction and interest in other females; Lennon and Parker both tried to ensure that they were not perceived as 'checking out' teammates or other participants. Logan articulated a concern regarding the potential to make wrestling opponents uncomfortable, while Payton noted that she and her wife made announcements to teammates in order to make them more comfortable about sharing a hotel room. Payton explained that she could not recall a time that anyone had ever addressed her sexual identity in a negative way on her current team, “nothing comes to mind really, of a situation, it's sort of nothing that anyone's ever aired to us. Sometimes you get a kind of a look. That look, before you can really hide it”. She went on to explain a phenomenon very similar to that described earlier by Lennon,

> The unhappy surprise [laughter], you know, and after that look goes away typically they don't treat us any differently than they did before; but it's because of those looks that we try to make sure people are aware of our relationship ahead of time. That, you know, they know about it going in that they're not going to be caught off guard by it later; because you know, regardless of how

> comfortable they think they might be, nobody likes to be caught off guard and sometimes that brings things up that you didn't know were there.

The stories that the women told seem more complex than simply acting in ways that make others comfortable. If this was their only concern, it is likely that the women would have remained closeted both to their teams and within their other communities. Considering the comfort of others seems to be how the women are able to successfully navigate their participation in sport. Lennon noted being uncomfortable because she felt like she was making others uncomfortable at times and Quinn concurred:

> I'm still afraid that I'm going to put them in an awkward position; that they're still going to be like, 'eehh'. I still have that little bit of fear that they're just going to be like, 'oh why is she talking about this,' sort of thing; even though I know that they wouldn't do that. But I'm still really hesitant about it and I'm still a little nervous, 'cause it's something that they can't connect with 'cause they don't really have any idea [laughter]. Like they know what it's like to have an attraction for guys obviously, but they've never been exposed to having an attraction to a girl, not like it's any different, but I feel like they may think it's different and so I'm a bit hesitant about that.

It appears as though the women tried to avoid making others uncomfortable because the discomfort of others directly affected their social experience. Navigating for the comfort of others took many different forms including: (1) passing as straight or lesbian as well as the use of silence to avoid eliciting a homophobic response, (2) making announcements to teammates to prevent 'unhappy surprises', (3) making attempts to avoid being perceived as 'checking out' teammates, and (4) choosing sports with reputations for being 'accepting' and avoiding participating in sports that may make others uncomfortable, exemplified in Lennon's choice to not play water polo and Alex's quitting rugby to play roller derby instead. Participants found operating with the comfort of others in mind was both easier and safer than the alternative, creating a space where the women were able to participate in sport. Although as Lennon noted, it wasn't necessarily 'her problem' that others were uncomfortable, she acknowledged that their heterosexism and homo/biphobia affected her directly because it made her uncomfortable.

Homophobic Language

The women who spoke of gay slurs and casual homophobic language alluded to the idea that such language was interpreted differently at different points in their identity development. They noted that before they were out, they were fearful when they encountered homophobic language. This can be seen in Alex's story of hearing a student in her school use the word “fag” towards another student in school. It can also be seen in Quinn's recollection about a team member who had called an opposing player a 'faggot' before she had come out,

> It was just kinda a punch to the gut, 'cause I didn't know if she knew about me yet; 'cause this was very early on in the season, and it was kinda one of those things that, like, pushed me back a bit. I was gearing myself up to be like, 'hey guys blah blah blah,' and like talk about it maybe; but that kinda pushed me back a few steps I think.

Logan recalled a similar effect as perceived homophobia prevented her from coming out for several years. She recounted that a teammate's comment and concern about having wrestled a woman who was later seen kissing a female motivated her to remain closeted. Instances of overt homophobia seemed to act as signals to the women regarding the climate towards LGBTTQQIAAP individuals in their communities, which in turn encouraged them to remain closeted.

After coming out to their teams, the women spoke of interpreting gay slurs and casual homophobic language differently. They seemed to understand that not everyone who spoke this way was homophobic or unaccepting of LGBTTQQIAAP individuals; rather, they did not necessarily interpret such language as being hateful. Logan explained,

> People will make jokes and then that'd freak me right out [when closeted]. That just happens pretty often [laughter]. Like the thing is, now that I'm out and I see that it didn't actually make a difference to any of those people, now it feels like it's just a joke you know. It doesn't bother me personally when people make those jokes; but I will hesitate to make those jokes unless I'm with a smaller group of people I know and who know about me and who I know will get it. I will make a point of not making a joke in front of [inaudible word] entire team, certainly when I'm coaching in front of the high school kids, but even on the university team, just because I don't know who's still in that place, you know. I don't know who might still be in the closet right now and be hearing this and internalize that.

Whereas Alex, Payton and Parker spoke of being involved in sport in more accepting environments where casual homophobic language was presumably less common and less acceptable, Lennon, Logan, and Quinn spoke of attempts to curb the use of homophobic language within the sport environment after coming out. All three did so from a leadership role in sport; Logan as a coach, Lennon and Quinn as both leaders on their teams and through becoming active with formal awareness initiatives aimed at curbing homophobic language in sport. Logan articulated understanding that casual homophobic language was not necessarily meant to be wounding,

> It's mostly you know teenage boys you're working with who just don't even think about it, right. Like, I know when they use that word that they're *not* trying to be hurtful. But I also know that at that age they probably - it just has never crossed their mind and it's just totally normal for them. I've said a couple times, 'you know when I was in high school and nobody knew about me, or I was just kind of learning about me and I hadn't told anyone, it was much harder for me because of, you know, just hearing the language hearing kids throw that around so casually'. It contributes to the culture and the atmosphere and I think that can be worse than someone going off on an insane anti-gay rant. The couple times I've had to explain that to the teenage boys; these, you know, straight teenage boys, I've actually a couple of times been overwhelmed with their response and them getting very apologetic. In the months that followed, then they [would] catch themselves and stop. I've never had a bad experience; I've never asked a kid to stop saying it and have them do anything but be very, very polite about it.

Although the women used silence as a way to navigate their participation in sport, they also made attempts to increase awareness about the use of homophobic language and gay slurs and to curb their use by saying something when they heard such language used. That being said, the women also noted that there were certain situations where they felt uncomfortable and unable to intervene in the use of homophobic language, or when encountering homophobic or biphobic jokes and comments. When speaking about addressing the use of such language, Logan noted, “for every time that happens there are 10 or so times, someone says something like that, and I decide that I'm not going to do it; because it's not worth it”. Lennon spoke of becoming 'tired' because instances where she could intervene were so plentiful, and having to “pick her battles.” Logan and Alex mentioned that they were more likely to speak up in situations where they were addressing individuals with whom they had personal relationships, as opposed to interactions with larger groups or people whom they did not know. Logan explained,

> Standing up and saying anything is harder with a whole group of people. If it does get drawn into an argument, I don't want to feel like I'm having an argument with 10 people and them all throwing something after [at] me; and trying to respond to all of them. Whereas it's a lot easier to just get into the issue one-on-one with someone. That's actually probably the bigger factor really. If we're one-on-one I'll probably say something like 80% of the time whereas if it's a group it's going to be more like 50% of the time.

Because team sports typically involve larger groups, this may mean that queer individuals are potentially less outspoken, in response to homophobic or biphobic comments and actions than they might be in other social contexts. All of the women who participated in the study were involved in working to create social change in some capacity, but only two looked to sport as the primary environment in which to do so by being involved in organized efforts to curb the use of homophobic language in sport.

Sport as Positive Experience

Regardless of their sometimes negative or uncomfortable experiences, the women who participated in this study all saw value in their sport participation and they spoke about being grateful for finding acceptance and support in the team sport environment. Lennon pointed out, “I feel like I'm making this sound like some kind of Greek tragedy which it definitely isn't”. She went on:

> I made this sound so miserable which is not the case. You know, it can still be great and a lot of the time I found, with like intramural sport, it pretty much transcends sexuality; like you're all there just to have a good time and hang out with your buds and you know. 99% of the time that that's how it is. It's just that 1%.

In their participation after coming out, the women felt like part of a community and the relationships they built through their participation were valuable to them. Alex stated simply, “sport's important to me because it is community”. Lennon explained how sport facilitates relationship building with those she lives with,

> For me right now, like with where I'm at, it's definitely community; I don't get any sort of identity or anything out of the sports that I'm doing. But I feel so much closer to my house [university residence] and that's pretty much the reason that I do it. I'm doing it because like you know that's fun; and then I get to know

> my house better, like you know, 10 people at a time kind of thing.

This statement also speaks to how different sport contexts may affect the experiences of bisexual female participants. Lennon noted that intramural recreational sport provided a different experience compared to her experience in competitive varsity wrestling.

When asked what sport meant to her, Logan offered a contrasting perspective to Lennon's, perhaps because she was involved in competitive sport as well as coaching,

> The thing I've found about sports is that it can be, it can be the best thing in the world (inaudible), it can be the worst. There are all kinds of factors that make the difference there, and I think when it's good it's a source of friends (inaudible), it's a source of community, of belonging, of purpose, of all kinds of amazing things. [It] also teaches teamwork and discipline and respect, hard work; that sort of thing. For me it's just been a reason for doing everything; a reason for feeling like you fit somewhere and have something worth doing.

It should be noted that although they saw benefits from their involvement in sport, the women acknowledged that there are issues that still need to be addressed. This sentiment was usually conveyed beginning with the words 'I'm lucky'. Logan explained how she was lucky to be involved in a sport that is accepting of 'misfits',

> I think I'm lucky in that way honestly; I think it might mostly be just because [wrestling] is a sport where, like, nobody's normal [laughter]; and I mean really nobody's normal in the world, but like we get a lot more people that don't fit into mainstream society.

Lennon articulated, “like my life's pretty easy, like as much as I have occasionally uncomfortable situations, I never got kicked out of my house and I never got kicked out of a job or whatever”.

Quinn about her gratitude to her teammates for their support,

> The girls are awesome and honestly, whenever it comes to like thanking the girls I couldn't thank them enough, 'cause honestly like I don't know what I would have done if they weren't supportive or anything like that; and I don't know who I would have been now.

The concept of being lucky and grateful for their experiences came across again as the women were asked to articulate their advice to other bisexual women in sport. The vast majority of the women struggled to provide advice, and when they did, they often acknowledged that not everyone is accepting and supportive. Alex explained,

> Obviously we don't live in a perfect world. So there's still going to be people that are going to be homophobic. Being able to read people and know if they're safe or not and trusting in those people first before you make overt declarations of your sexual orientation. If you have a few strong members in that community where you know you're safe, then I feel like it's okay to make [an] overt declaration as long as you understand that there can still be negative reaction. But at least you'll have support in that scenario then.

Payton explained that her sport experience changed when she came out but articulated that it was likely due, at least in part, to a change in the type of sport she was involved in,

> I would like to say that being out as an athlete has been a far more comfortable

> experience to me than being closeted as an athlete, because you know there's always a risk that you're going to encounter people who are homophobic and discriminatory, but at least I don't have to worry about it now. I was always so focused on making sure that people wouldn't find out that I lost my enjoyment of the sport that I was involved in. I know that the culture of every sport is different though; and that that [finding an accepting environment in sport] isn't something that's necessarily going to be possible for everyone. In which case I would just recommend that they start playing roller derby instead [laughter].

In imparting advice to others, the women articulated the idea that the climate in sport, and in society more broadly, is not always hospitable to LGBTTQQIAAP individuals. They seemed to understand that although their experience in sport was largely positive after coming out, this may not always be the case for others. The participants in this study feared being socially ostracized by peers, friends, and family; being judged; and being physically assaulted. With these expectations it is understandable that they speak positively of their experiences in sport after coming out.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the interpersonal experiences of young bisexual women who participate in team sport, and the meanings that they bring those experiences. In addition to exploring the experiences of the participants, my study also developed to include the experiences of the women as young adults and spoke to how their experiences in sport changed over time. In the previous chapter, Figure 1 showed the interaction between each of the themes and how the development of a queer identity mediated how the participants ascribed meaning to their interpersonal experiences with their team members. It highlighted how ‘Navigating for Others' Comfort’ was central to the women's experiences on their teams. Additionally, ‘Fear and Perceived Fallout’ was shown to be a central motivation in the decisions made by the participants. In this chapter, I organized the discussion of the findings to address the experiences of the participants in three periods: prior to coming out of the closet, coming out, and after they came out to their teams. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the limitations of the study and recommendations for coaches and sport organizations as well as directions for future research.

This chapter links the findings of my study to the literature pertaining to queer individuals’ experiences in sport while also speaking to how the management of the participants' sexual identities in the context of team sport appeared to be similar to the strategies used by others who possess concealable stigmatized identities.

Closeted to Team

The women in this study spoke of their fear of social exclusion and judgement as being the primary reason that they chose to remain closeted as adolescents. At the very least this speaks to the culturally pervasive homo/biphobia that still exists in much of Canada. Although none of the women recalled personally experiencing physical violence, all recalled witnessing and/or experiencing instances of verbal harassment, threats to their physical safety, homophobic slurs, biphobia, erasure, and judgement. For five of the six women, the fear of such repercussions motivated them to remain closeted.

Several of the women noted that sport was a context where homophobic comments seemed to be more common. Barber and Krane (2007) noted a similar phenomenon, finding that athletic environments were one of the places that LGB youth feel least safe and supported. Both Lennon and Logan noted that they remained closeted to their teams even after coming out in their other communities. Although Anderson (2002) noted that cultural homophobia may very well be decreasing, at the time that the women in this study were adolescent athletes (2013 and earlier), homo/biphobia seemed to be a salient social force within their teams. This may be because of the presence of elevated hostility towards LGBT individuals on women's teams compared to men's teams found by Anderson and Bullingham (2013). The women in my study noted that instances of overt homophobia were rare on their teams, and although several of the women recalled homophobic language as having a negative affect while they were closeted, they noted that it did not have the same effect after they came out.

One of the primary ways that the women in my study managed their bisexual identities on their sport teams was to simply not speak about them. This silence surrounding the presence of queer individuals within sport was also noted by Griffin (2002) also noted a similar silence surrounding the presence of queer individuals within sport, while Kauer and Krane (2006) found that silencing was one method of managing stigmatized sexual identities. Similarly, Anderson and Bullingham (2013) noted that one of the most common forms of discrimination on female teams was the presence of 'don't ask don't tell', where individuals with queer identities are permitted to participate without issue, but the subject of those identities is not accepted as a topic of conversation. As adolescents, the women in my study seemed to use 'don't ask don't tell' as a way to justify their remaining closeted. Quinn and Payton, for example, both recalled that if someone had asked them about their sexual identity, they likely would have come out when they were younger.

Anderson (2002) found that gay male athletes perceived their teams to be homophobic while they were closeted. The men in his study noted that casual homophobic language and jokes were interpreted as indicative of homo/biphobia while they were closeted, but after coming out, the men no longer felt that this language was necessarily homophobic or meant to wound them. The women in my study spoke of similar interpretations of such language during the time that they were closeted. However, unlike the men in Anderson's study, the women in this study continued to be offended to some degree by homophobic language even after coming out. Several of the women spoke to how the use of such language perpetuated the creation of an ostensibly homophobic environment, which could negatively affect the experiences of queer athletes in sport.

As in Ravel and Rail's (2008) study, several of my participants spoke of a lack of visible alternatives as affecting their understanding of their sexual identities when they were younger. Growing up, several of the women noted that they struggled because they didn't know that there was the possibility for a sexual identity outside of being 'straight' or 'gay'.

This study built on the body of knowledge pertaining to the experiences of closeted bisexual women within sport. Several of the participants noted that it was challenging to develop an understanding of a bisexual identity due to limited exposure to identities outside of the dichotomous view of sexuality. Lennon spoke to this erasure of bisexual identity within a sport context, noting that having a teammate who denied the existence of bisexuality was a motivating factor in encouraging her to stay closeted to her team.

Coming Out

One of the central findings of this study is that disclosure of a bisexual identity changed the participants' interpersonal experiences within the context of team sport. Stoelting (2011) noted that that the act of disclosing one's sexual identity is an interactional process while Chaudoir and Fisher (2010) noted that interpersonal disclosure, “fundamentally changes the nature of social interactions among disclosers, their confidants, and their broader social contexts” (p. 5). Knowing this, it makes sense that the women felt that their interpersonal experiences on their teams changed as a result of their coming out. Further, this interpretation of disclosure offers an explanation for the variation in 'coming out' experiences described by the women in my study. At times they chose to remain closeted, particularly in adolescence when they perceived teammates and other peers to be homo/biphobic and potentially violent towards queer individuals who were out.

In discussing their decisions to come out, some of the women spoke of being tired of hiding and lying. They seemed to be seeking a greater level of authenticity than they were able to achieve while closeted. Likewise, in a study of lesbian athletes' coming out experiences, Stoelting (2011) found the desire to be honest with those they were close to was a reason for disclosure of their identity to teammates. Additionally, she noted that some women came out to avoid being perceived as dishonest if teammates were to find out about their identities through other channels. One of the salient concerns of the women in my study was a desire to avoid such perceptions, and any association to “the predatory lesbian trope”. The stereotype of lesbian women as sexual predators was noted by Griffin (1992) as “particularly pernicious” (p. 260), who attributed it to the pathologizing of homosexuality in the 19th-century. Although the stereotype is not new, the participants' in my study noted efforts to distance themselves from potential associations made between bisexuality and sexual “insatiability” or predation, which is a finding not highlighted in previous literature.

Stoelting (2011) found that one of the deciding factors in coming out was the participants' perceptions of their teams being safe and accepting. In my study, although Parker and Quinn spoke of perceived safety and acceptance within their teams prior to coming out, the other participants spoke of their teams as being perceived in this light only after coming out. Like the women in Stoelting's study, the participants looked for contextual cues to their team climates prior to deciding to come out. The primary indicators of a positive and supportive team climate for the women in my study seemed to be the type of sport (roller derby, wrestling, and rugby) as well as the presence of other queer women in their sport or on their team. The fact that several of the women in this study chose, at times, not to disclose their sexual identities to teammates seems to also support Stoelting's assertion that the decision to come out is a complex one that takes into account both time and place.

Raval and Rail (2008) found that sport appeared to play an important role in the development of the sexual identities of several of the queer female athletes who participated in their study. In my study, this seemed to be the case for Alex, who noted that a comment from a queer teammate, who told Alex that she was in denial about being “gay”, motivated her to reflect on her sexual identity. Similarly, Quinn's lesbian teammate seemed to have a highly positive impact on the development of a positive view of her own sexuality. However, the other women in my study did not seem to have similar experiences, perhaps because all lived in centres that were significantly smaller than Montreal, where Ravel and Rail's study took place. Living in smaller cities may have limited the exposure or access that the women had to other LGBTTQQIAAP athletes while they were closeted. The fact that several of the women in my study noted that they found sports which they perceived to be both tolerant and accepting upon leaving their communities of origin supports this explanation.

The majority of the women in my study spoke of sport as being one of the last social contexts where they came out. This stands in stark contrast to Raval and Rail

(2008) who noted that the majority of their participants remained closeted outside of their sport. This difference could also be attributed to the comparative lack of contact that the women in my study had with other queer female athletes, which may have prevented them from perceiving their teams to be supportive of non-heterosexual identities. If they were unable to see examples of other queer women being accepted on their teams, it may have been more difficult for the women in my study to gauge the climate of their teams. As a result, they may have remained closeted for a longer period of time within a sport context while they sought to develop supportive relationships within other social contexts first.

The women who took part in my study generally did not feel their teams were supportive of their identities until after they had come out. This means that, with the exception of Parker, their experiences in sport when closeted did not involve the feeling of acceptance and support from their teams. A number of scholars have noted that garnering social support can be important in determining psychological well-being for individuals with stigmatized identities (Beals, Peplau, & Gable, 2009; Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013). Without perceived social support for their queer identities within their teams, their psychological well-being may have suffered while they were closeted to teammates. Meeus and Deković (1995) found that “relational identity” is much more important to females than males, that it becomes consistently stronger as adolescents age, and that identity development is influenced primarily by peers. This means girls tend to define themselves by their relationships and they use feedback from their peers to develop their identities. Because of this, a perceived lack of support from teammates during adolescence may have a detrimental effect in girls' attempts to construct positive views of their identities. It may also mean that young women who do not perceive the environment within sport to be accepting and supportive choose not to persist in their participation which may contribute to the high attrition rates of females from sport during adolescence.

Dumith, Gigante, Domingues, and Kohl (2011) reviewed the literature pertaining to adolescent sport participation and found that physical activity declines in adolescents and that this decline has increased among girls over the past decade. Some reasons for female athletes' withdrawal include negative coaching experiences, lack of enjoyment, and lack of playing time (Butcher, Linder, & Johns, 2002; Keathley, Himelein, & Srigley, 2013). However, to date I have been unable to find literature pertaining to how sexual identity may intersect with such concerns; it is possible that identifying as queer could play a role in such negative experiences and contribute to withdrawal from sport participation. If queer sexual identity is a factor in female adolescent sport attrition, this is particularly concerning in light of two recent polls where 31% of Americans under 30 (Moore, 2015) and 49% of British 18-24 year olds identified within the bisexual spectrum (Dahlgreen & Shakespeare, 2015). These statistics represent the most recent attempts to measure what appears to be a growing demographic of bisexual identifying youth in the Western world and point to a growing need for increased awareness and education about the experiences of bisexual sport participants.

Out to Team

Once out to their teams, the participants in my study noted a shift in the meaning ascribed to their interpersonal experiences with team members. Ravel and Rail (2008) noted that one can be out without coming out, meaning that he/she no longer actively conceals his/her identity but also does not necessarily clarify it at every opportunity or interaction. This assertion seems to also apply to the women in my study with several noting that they were out, but did not always actively come out. The participants communicated that they would mention their identity if it came up or became relevant and that it was no longer something that they tried to hide. However, some of the women also noted that it was sometimes easier to say nothing and allow people to make assumptions about their identity. While several women noted that, at times, they allowed others to assume they were straight, Payton, who was married to a woman, allowed her teammates to assume she was lesbian. This suggests that there is a difference between being out and coming out, where the former serves to normalize their identity while the later serves to clarify it. Further, it highlights how silence was an ongoing strategy used by the participants to manage their queer identities in team sport.

Anderson (2002) found that gay male athletes' interpretations of their teams' climates towards LGBT people changed after they came out of the closet. The women in the present study noted that this was also their experience; once they felt that they were 'out' to teammates, they perceived their teams to be more hospitable and supportive because their teammates generally did not direct disparaging or malicious homo/biphobic remarks towards them or make threats of violence. The gay male athletes in

Anderson's (2011) study spoke of not taking such casual homophobic language personally because they understood that teammates were not referring to gay sexual identity but were using the word “gay” to describe something they disliked. One of the men noted that “everybody” including him used such language and, because of this, casual homophobic language cannot necessarily be used as a way to gauge the presence of homophobia. In my study, Logan articulated a similar sentiment when she spoke of her interactions as a coach of high school boys, noting that they often did not even realize that their words could be hurtful to others. A study by Burn (2000) found that approximately half of the heterosexual, American university students who used words such as “fag” and “queer,” were not strongly against homosexuality. However, the use of such language was most prevalent among young males rather than females.

Burn (2000) wrote, “the lesbian possibility is largely invisible and, as such, it is seldom referred to in heterosexual friendship culture” (p. 3). Several of the women in my study recalled instances where casual homophobic language was used within a sport environment, perhaps the relationship between masculinity and sport creates a culture where such language becomes more common than it might be in other female social environments. The use of homophobic language within female sport teams may also be a method used by athletes to create spaces that are less hospitable to queer women in an attempt to create spaces where women can participate without falling victim to the stereotype of female athletes as lesbian. Veri (1999) noted team sports such as softball and basketball draw homophobic discourse to a disproportionate degree when compared to sports such as gymnastics or figure skating. Where the latter comply with normative views of femininity, the former act to challenge standards of femininity (Veri, 1999). The use of homophobic language in women’s sport is an example of Ezzell's (2009) “defensive othering” (p. 112). Additionally, Burn, Kadlec, and Rexer (2005) noted that casual homophobic language, a form of indirect antigay harassment, can affect one's decision to come out. Both lesbian women and bisexual individuals were more offended than gay men by hypothetical descriptions of indirect antigay harassment. Although participants reported that, for the most part, encountering such statements would not influence the likelihood of coming out, the study showed perceived offensiveness was significantly associated with a decreased likelihood of individuals coming out.

The use of homophobic language may, as Logan suggested, stem from a lack of education and awareness on the part of those who invoke it. However, regardless of how homophobic language was interpreted by the participants throughout the coming out process, the use of such language is always harmful as it contributes to a homophobic discourse, which perpetuates the cultural acceptance of heterosexism and homophobia more broadly. As Hargreaves (1994) stated, “compulsory heterosexuality is part of a system of domination that perpetuates patriarchal relations and the wielding of power over other sexualities” (p. 261). The creation and perpetuation of a heteronormative culture in sport through the use of homophobic language and the silencing of queer voices serves to maintain a dominant heterosexist discourse while relegating those with queer identities to the margins.

DeLamater (1981) noted two of the three ways which institutions control behaviour are through (1) providing a set of assumptions and norms, and (2) through the utilization of the perspective in interactions as a means of informal control. Franks and Grecas (1992) wrote that there is power inherent in the use of labels in shaping self-conceptions especially when those labels are applied by others in a position of authority over those who are labeled as they create a norm against which to measure the 'other'. The use of words such as “gay”, “fag”, “dyke” etc., regardless of the intent or lack thereof motivating their use, results in the control of athletes' sexuality by encouraging the adoption of a visibly heterosexual identity while encouraging the silence and invisibility of those who identify as anything other than heterosexual.

The women's change in perception of the use of casual homophobic language after coming out may have been the result of their successful gauging of their team climates as safe and accepting prior to coming out and their discontinuing participation with teams that were less supportive. As Alex noted, even after coming out in other contexts and on other sport teams, she chose to remain closeted to, and later cease participation with, one of her teams because she perceived the environment to be hostile towards queer women. All but one of the women in my study remained closeted as high school students and chose not to come out until they obtained sufficient social support. This could have been because they accurately gauged the climate of their teams to be relatively supportive, or at least not homophobic, prior to deciding to come out.

Each of the women in this study continued to use silence as a tactic to navigate their interactions with teammates even after coming out. At times this meant 'passing' as straight or allowing others to assume that they were lesbian. Ravel and Rail (2008) noted that two participants within their study who identified as 'ambiguous' and bisexual chose to pass as gaie (a Francophone term used to denote both affinity towards and distancing from the term “lesbian”) when they participated on teams where 'gaie' was the label used by the majority of their teammates. Maybe this tactic of 'passing' was used in an attempt to create a sense of belonging to a community. If physical location prevents one from engaging with a bisexual community, identifying as 'gay' or 'queer' may allow access to membership within a broader non-heterosexual community.

Adams and Anderson’s (2012) study of gay male athletes in the United States found their queer sexual identity “makes no difference” in the eyes of their teammates. Similarly, the bisexual women in my study stated their sexual identity did not come up within the context of sport and their teammates seemed to be unfazed when they came out. This may be an example of a cultural shift in the acceptance of individuals with marginalized sexual identities, especially among younger generations. It is worth noting that in failing to acknowledge the existence of queer identities and in responding to disclosure of teammates' queer identities with permissive silence, such identities are still shifted to the margins. In saying that “it makes no difference” or that “it doesn't come up,” athletes permit the existence of queer identities on their teams, but they also silence conversations regarding diverse sexual identities. Permissive silence around this topic may allow athletes to feel comfortable changing in front of their queer teammates and sharing other spaces with them. However, such silence fails to acknowledge that for the holders of those queer identities, their sexual identities matter, both to their daily experience of the world and to how they navigate interpersonal interactions across social contexts.

Sykes (1998) suggested the silencing of lesbian athletes may reflect hegemony within the institution and culture of sport, while Griffin (1992) wrote “Silence is the most consistent and enduring manifestation of homophobia in women’s sport” (p. 253). Knowing this, one would expect the presence of “silence” to apply to any non-dominant sexual identity; indeed, the findings of the present study suggest that the same can be said for bisexual females in sport. As in Anderson's (2002) study with gay male athletes, the bisexual women in my study often chose not to bring up the topic of their sexual identities with teammates, as a result, at times they were complicit in their own oppression. Griffin (1992) noted the act of silence surrounding lesbian identities in sport as a practice “passed on to each new generation of women in sport” (p. 253). However, the women in my study were not ignorant to the oppression they experienced and the silence which they practiced, as all but one of the participants recognized the larger societal systems of oppression at play. Additionally, several of the women spoke of a desire to normalize queer identities through their being out. Although, unlike the women in in Stoelting's (2011) study who noted such normalization as a motivating factor in coming out to their teams, this did not seem to be a factor in my participants' initial decision to come out to their teammates. Three of the women in this study spoke of attempts to curb casual homophobic language within sport, but it was more common for them to choose to advocate against both institutional and cultural heterosexual hegemony outside of their team environment. Perhaps this was because they deemed their sport environments to be neither the time nor the place to make waves.

The women in my study cited significant fear around their sexuality causing discomfort for teammates. Most also noted being fearful of the potential fallout of coming out, such as verbal harassment, physical assault, or losing their place on a team. Although they noted the support of their current teams, residual fear of how others might react may have motivated the women in my study to avoid actively speaking up within their own teams. Considering the women's gratitude and appreciation for being able to participate as adults on teams that permitted and even supported their presence, it seems possible that they chose not to make an issue out if it so that they could continue to participate without risking negative consequences.

Compromising safe spaces. Curry (1991) noted that locker-rooms act as locations for “fraternal bonding” in men's sport while Eng (2008) suggested that nakedness in locker-rooms make sport an “extraordinary” venue where tolerance for queer participants can be lacking. Although she did not address locker-rooms specifically, Griffin (1998) noted that sport is a social context where intimacy and bonding between female teammates is encouraged. Griffin (1998) also noted that locker-rooms and hotel rooms can be problematic spaces for lesbian women because some athletes are “concerned about being the object of lesbian locker room lust” (p. 196). She continued, “some heterosexual women assume that lesbians are sexual predators whose obsession with sex overrides other more mundane locker room activities such as rehashing a game, getting dressed, tending injuries, or bantering and listening to music with teammates” (p. 196).

The women in my study all spoke to an awareness that they could be perceived as compromising a 'safe space'. Although Alex was the only woman who recounted direct experience with teammates who were outspoken about their discomfort with sharing such spaces with queer women, all seemed aware of the stereotype of LGBT individuals as sexually deviant and predatory. Eng (2008) spoke to this stereotype in writing that LGB individuals, “are traditionally associated with a constantly active sexuality” (p. 106). Knowledge of this stereotype seemed to motivate the women to navigate their interpersonal experiences in a sport environment in ways that would prevent their teammates from applying the stereotype to them. Both Griffin (1992, 1998) and Caudwell (2002) noted the presence of the stereotype of lesbians as sexual predators was noteworthy within sporting contexts. Herek (2002) noted that women rated bisexual individuals significantly less favourably than homosexuals and further suggested that bisexual individuals might be targets for hostility because “many heterosexuals may equate bisexuality with sexual promiscuity or nonmonogamy” (p. 265). It is possible that, as a result of having their identities viewed in such a negative light, the participants in my study were sensitive to being perceived as untrustworthy or predatory.

The concern of the women related to their being perceived as compromising a “safe space” could also be read as an example of how Gilligan’s (1982) “ethic of self care” affects their sport experiences. Henderson and Allen (1991) noted how this ethic of care can cause women to place the needs of others before their own, resulting in their neglecting their own leisure experiences. The women in my study appear to exemplify such neglect, as they placed the comfort of their teammates above their own desire to feel at ease in their sport experiences.

Supportive environments. The women in my study felt that their teams were supportive of their queer sexual identities apart from a few notable cases, such as Alex's experience on one of her rugby teams. Anderson (2002) noted that the men he spoke to minimized their experiences with homophobia on their teams and suggested that this may be the result of what he termed “reverse relative deprivation” (p. 868) where, rather than acknowledging the challenges of being a queer individual in sport, individuals noted their positive experiences and ignored the presence of homophobic language and comments. Anderson (2002) suggested that his participants may have minimized their experiences with homophobia on their teams and felt acceptance despite the presence of homophobic language because, prior to coming out, they expected their teams to be highly intolerant of their queer identities. This phenomenon was found to be present in subsequent studies of both male and female sexual minority athletes (Anderson & Bullingham, 2013; Anderson et al., 2014) and could explain why the women in my study felt their teams were highly supportive of them even in the presence of homo/biphobia and erasure. As adolescents, the women in my study were highly fearful of the social ramifications of coming out as bisexual, noting a fear of physical violence, verbal harassment, and ostricization. By comparison, they felt like their actual experiences were highly positive, noting that they were 'lucky'. “Reverse relative deprivation” explains why they felt their current teams were supportive of their queer identities. It is also possible that the women did have highly positive and supportive teams at the time of their interviews, perhaps this was due, at least in part, to their seeking out such environments.

Generational differences. The participants in my study perceived their parents' and grandparents' generations as being less accepting and understanding of queer identities. Griffin (2012) noted an increasing awareness around LGBT identities in sport but the existence of a “generational gap” in coaches' comfort and awareness compared to their athletes. This gap was apparent to the women who participated in the present study as they spoke of coaches, parents, and grandparents. This gap may exist because of a lack of exposure to individuals with queer identities. Additionally, older individuals would have more experience with the homohysteria of the 1990s noted by Anderson (2011). Few of the women could recall instances of coming out to their coaches, and those who did noted that their coach was the last on their team to know, in Quinn's case, several years after her teammates. Additionally, none of the women recalled coming out to their coaches as adolescents. Perhaps this was the result of their gauging older individuals to be less accepting, understanding and supportive. The participants may have also simply chosen not to come out to their coaches because they did not deem their sexual identity to be important information to be shared in a sport context. This idea is supported by the women's assertions that their sexual identities simply did not come up while they were playing their sport.

Griffin (1998) as well as Anderson and Bullingham (2013) found that the coach's attitude is likely to significantly influence the experience of an openly lesbian athlete on her team. It is difficult to say whether this was the case for the women who participated in this study because only one recalled significant interactions with her coaching staff around her sexual identity. Two women noted that they had never come out to a coach, while another noted that she purposefully chose not to come out to a coach when she was younger. Regardless of their experiences, all of the women seemed to acknowledge that a coach has significant power on a team.

The women in my study seemed to be understanding of the older, often less accepting, individuals in their lives. Lennon noted that if she had come out to her team in her first year of university, her coach would have likely been okay with it, but she noted that he probably would have told distasteful jokes to show his (dis)comfort. Logan described a similar circumstance where a coach who used homophobic language and made homophobic jokes was perceived by his athletes to be ignorant. Perhaps the women were seemingly accepting and tolerant of older individuals because they possessed some understanding of where their coaches were coming from, or because they held ageist assumptions about older people's attitudes pertaining to sexuality. Many of the women seemed to use their parents' and grandparents' lack of understanding or support of their identities as a touchstone to help them comprehend the lack of support from other members of the same generations. None of the women seemed upset by this “generational gap”, perhaps because anger or frustration around this issue could affect their views of not only their coaches, but also their parents and grandparents. It is noteworthy that in speaking of their relationships with their parents, four of the women noted that they simply did not discuss their queer identities with their parents after coming out to them, describing a 'live and let live' approach to the topic. Perhaps they applied the same philosophy when interacting with other adults in their lives, including their coaches.

Management of concealable stigmatized identities. Kaufman and Johnson (2004) critiqued much of the literature pertaining to gay and lesbian identity, suggesting,

> To more fully understand how gays and lesbians develop and manage their identities, we need to step back from the gay- and lesbian-identity literature and use broader theoretical ideas from symbolic interactionism that aid in analyzing identity development and maintenance. (p. 808)

Further, they noted,

> Both the stigma literature and the literature on gay and lesbian identity development document a range of stigma management strategies including 'passing' as part of the dominant group, selectively associating with supportive individuals, and participating in social movement activities to change the perception of the social group. (p. 809)

The women in this study appeared to manage their sexual identities in ways similar to those who manage other concealable stigmatized identities such as abortion, mental illness, childhood sexual abuse, sexual assault, and HIV/AIDS (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004). Whether or not the women were closeted determined which strategies they could use.

Several of the women noted that they initially chose to withdraw from social situations as closeted adolescents. Similarly, even after coming out, at times they chose to 'pass' as members of a more dominant group, either remaining closeted or allowing others to assume they were either lesbian or straight. Once out to their communities, they chose to participate on teams they perceived to be supportive of their identities, an example of selective association with supportive individuals. All of the women also spoke about being involved in contributing to the LGBTTQQIAAP social justice movement outside of their involvement with their teams.

Although there are likely differences in how management strategies are used by members of each stigmatized group, there is little literature pertaining to the experiences of individuals within these populations in sport. Additionally, Goffman (1963) mentioned the importance of situational context in determining how those with stigmatized identities manage those identities. The women in my study spoke to context as being highly relevant to their interpersonal experiences. The sport which they participated in, the level (recreational vs. competitive) they participated at, the perceived climate towards the LGBT community on their team, and the age at which they participated in sport influenced how they chose to manage their bisexual identities.

Limitations

There are multiple limitations to the study. The majority of the participants were recruited through social media and websites, which required that participants have access to the Internet. All of the women who were recruited felt they were out, not actively choosing to remain closeted in any of their communities, and noted that their experiences were perceived differently when they were closeted. All had access to white privilege, were university educated, and had the opportunity to move away from the towns or cities they grew up in for at least a year. As a result, the findings of this study represent the experiences of individuals with a significant amount of privilege. It is possible that women who are closeted, women of various ethnic backgrounds, and those of lower socio-economic status could have very different experiences than the ones represented in the present study.

All participants also lived in urban centers at the time of their interviews and all but two had grown up in urban areas. The two women with rural experiences noted that by comparison, they perceived their rural communities as much less accepting of queer identities. Further, it is noteworthy that the majority of the women who participated in this study were involved in non-traditional female sporting spaces such as wrestling and roller-derby. As Anderson and Bullingham (2013) noted, “there is no monolithic athletic culture” (p. 4). Women involved in more “mainstream” female sports such as gymnastics or figure skating may have different interpersonal experiences.

Finally, a requirement for participation in this study was recent involvement in a team sport environment. Also, all of the women in this study persisted in their team sport participation through adolescence and into adulthood. As a result, it was not possible to gain the perspective of women who did not persist in their sport participation, perhaps because of negative experiences in team sport environments.

Recommendations

First and foremost, I recommend that sport and recreation organizations create explicit policies pertaining to the prevention of discrimination based on sexual identity as well as the use of homophobic language, casual or otherwise. Further, coaches should discuss and enforce these policies with their teams. Regulations are of little use if athletes are unaware of their existence or if coaches are unwilling to enforce them. It is possible that enforcing such policies could contribute to the creation of a team environment where LGBTTQQIAAP athletes feel comfortable coming out at a younger age, which may improve their social experiences in sport. However, when asked what advice they might have for younger bisexual female athletes, most of the women in this study struggled to offer advice. Even after noting that their experiences after coming out were positive and that the fallout was not nearly as bad as they had expected, they noted that they would not necessarily recommend coming out to youth in a similar situation. Perhaps this was because they were aware that such a decision could have significantly more backlash than what they experienced. Additionally, several of the participants in this study suggested that coaches take steps to become educated about the queer community and how they can be supportive, or at least not harmful to LGBTTQQIAAP athletes who may still be closeted. They noted that coaches should not make it the responsibility of their players to educate them about queer sexual identities. At least if supportive policies were created and enforced, LGBTTQQIAAP youth might have fewer negative experiences within their sport. If coaches consistently enforced such policies and demonstrated some understanding and knowledge of queer identities, LGBTTQQIAAP athletes may see them as supportive adults rather than making the assumption that they are homophobic or unsupportive based on their age.

Although sport policies regarding equity and respect are helpful, they may not be enough to curb the existence and effects of homo/biphobia in sport particularly in cases where homophobic language may not be perceived by coaches and athletes to be harmful. Sport organizations and coaching associations should consider making educational materials accessible to their members in order to provide information about the diversity of queer identities as well as information pertaining to how to create explicitly supportive and accepting cultures within team environments. Resources such as those provided by the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS) are a step in the right direction but currently provide limited information pertaining to bisexuality and other minority sexual identities beyond gay and lesbian. Limited information on the diversity of sexual identities may perpetuate ignorance regarding such identities and create the potential for erasure, prejudice, and discrimination.

Future research could explore the experiences of bisexual females involved in sport who are currently adolescents. The participants in this study recalled difficult experiences as youth involved in sport, but most seemed to prefer to concentrate on the positive experiences that they had more recently. Further, near the end of their interviews, two of the participants seemed to recall highly negative experiences, saying that they had forgotten about them. It is possible that more of the women forgot about similarly negative events. If this were the case, speaking to current adolescents would paint a more complete picture of their experiences with such events. In the same vein, future research could explore how perceived support from teammates may affect the psychological well-being of bisexual adolescent athletes and whether sexual identity affects adolescent withdrawal from sport participation. However, special attention should be paid to protecting the safety and confidentiality of participants who are minors. This may be especially challenging considering the fact that they may still be closeted to their parents or guardians, friends, teammates, and/or school communities, and fear may be a strong motivator for closeted individuals to avoid discussing their sexual identities.

This study captured the voices of women living in urban centers across Canada, although two of the women spoke of past experiences in more rural settings, additional research is needed in order to shed light on how the experiences of rural women may differ from their urban counterparts. Additional research could also explore whether or not the stereotypes of queer individuals as sexual predators, untrustworthy, and deceptive, affect bisexual individuals more than their gay and lesbian peers.

Further research is also needed regarding how class, ethnicity, and other salient components of identity may affect the experiences of bisexual identifying women in the context of sport. Bradford (2004) noted that, “members of minority racial, ethnic, and class groups described multiple layers of oppression which tended to intensify their experience of their bisexual identity” (p. 19).

Conclusion

The present study explored the experiences of six self-identified bisexual Canadian women in team sport. The women in this study all saw value in participating in sport. They discussed their experiences as adolescents as being uncomfortable at times after they began experiencing same-gender attraction. The first research question pertained to the interpersonal experiences of these young, bisexual women within their sport teams. The most salient point in regards to this question was the women’s fear of the social repercussions of adopting a bisexual identity. Although they continued to participate in sport, the women noted that fear of being found out had a significant impact on their social experiences in sport, several noting that they pulled back from engaging with teammates as they began hiding their sexual identities. Once they were out to team members, the participants in this study noted that, although their fear diminished, they were still concerned about how team members perceived them, especially when occupying ‘safe spaces’.

The second research question sought to delve into the meanings that the women ascribed to their interpersonal experiences in sport. As closeted athletes, they interpreted casual homophobic language and gay slurs as indicative of teammates' homophobic views, and as a result, they chose to remain closeted. Once they were out, the women became more comfortable and generally felt supported and accepted by their teammates. At the same time, they continued to silence their own identities at times and engage in other stigma management techniques in order to navigate social interactions, noting that they did not want to cause their teammates to feel uncomfortable. Additionally, as adults, the women seemed to seek out sport environments that were supportive of, or at least not outwardly hostile towards, their sexual identities. Some of the women found that the teams they were already participating in were supportive, while others moved into different sports entirely.

This study contributes to a growing body of knowledge pertaining to the experiences of bisexual individuals in sport. Recent literature suggests that the climate towards LGBTTQQIAAP individuals in sport is improving and generally accepting towards LGB athletes in the United States and the United Kingdom (Anderson, 2011; Anderson et al., 2013; Maddocks, 2013). This study suggests that similarly accepting climates exist in urban centers across Canada. However, the women in this study found such support and acceptance in their adult lives. Their experiences as adolescents and young women within sport and other social environments were negative and damaging at times, and their observations of the negative, sometimes violent, treatment towards their non-heterosexual peers motivated them to remain closeted. Even as adults, some of the women noted rare but salient negative experiences within their teams. The findings show that there is still a significant amount of work to be done in creating sport environments that are supportive of and welcoming to young bisexual females in Canada.

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Appendix

Interview Guide- “Out” Athletes

1. What sport/sports do you participate in? At what level?

2. What does sport mean to you? Why is it important?

3. Are there members of your team, coaches, or teammates' parents who you are not out to? How do you decide who to come out to?

4. Can you tell me about times when you are engaging in team activities that you would think about your sexuality? Probes: Do you and your teammates talk about crushes or relationships? Do general comments ever make you think about your sexual identity? How do you engage in those conversations and/or comments? Why?

5. Tell me about your interactions with your teammates. What are those interactions like? Probes: Do you ever feel uncomfortable? What contributed to that feeling? How did you react and why?

6. Are there relationships or crushes that you only talk about with certain people? Why?

7. How do you handle interactions with teammates around your sexual identity? (do you talk about crushes or relationship openly? Why or Why not?)

8. Can you tell me about interactions with your coaches? Have they been different with different coaches? Probes: Has your coach made you feel uncomfortable in their communication with you? In their interactions with other team members when you were present? How did you react? Why?

9. Have you had much interaction with parents, friends or family of team members? What are those interactions like for you? Probes: How do those interactions make you feel? Why? How did you react?

10. Has your experience changed compared to experiences that you may have had before you were out to team members?

11. How would you compare how you interact with others around your sexual identity outside of team sport (at home, school, with friends, playing other sports etc.)? Is it different? How? Why?

12. What do you think is the biggest contributor to your overall experience on your team(s)?

13. How would you describe your experience of being a bisexual athlete on a team where there are not many other bisexual athletes?

14. What advice would you have for other female athletes who may have just started to identify as bisexual? What advice would you have for coaches?

15. Do you have any questions for me, or is there anything else that you would like to share about your experience?

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