14 The changing nature of lesbian athletes coming out in competitive organised team sports

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Introduction

The stories of athletes 'coming out' as lesbian, gay, or bisexual differ significantly throughout research depending on the cultural epoch in which the research was conducted (Anderson & Bullingham, 2015; Anderson, Magrath, & Bullingham, 2016; Griffin, 1998). Using Griffin's taxonomy of climates, this chapter tracks the transition from the hostile climates of the 1980s, through conditional tolerance, to the open and inclusive zeitgeist of today in many Western contexts. Previously, only athletes who were integral to their team's success had been able to come out in climates of conditional tolerance (Anderson, 2002; Anderson & Bullingham, 2015). Athletes (both male and female) at a recreational level are increasingly able to come out regardless of their place on the team (Anderson et al., 2016). In fact, it could be argued now that it is psychologically beneficial to come out rather than remaining closeted (Anderson et al., 2016). The potential reason for this change is that the lesbian label is being negated in today's more inclusive sporting environment.

Lesbian athletes were significantly researched in the 1990s (Cahn, 1994; Griffin, 1998; Hekma, 1998; Lenskyj, 1991). Griffin (1998) acknowledged that three climates exist for lesbian athletes: hostile, conditionally tolerant, and open and inclusive – with hostility being evident in the 1980s and 1990s. A product of their culture, the authors of these investigations may have used their research as a warning to other athletes thinking of coming out of the closet. As a result, lesbian athletes frequently use silence as a form of protection in hostile sporting environments. Silence regarding their sexual orientation serves as a means of surviving constant hostility (Elling, De Knop, & Knoppers, 2003; Griffin, 1998; Krane & Barber, 2005). Yet, silence carries social-emotional implications as well. Silence is a form of oppression that is faced by lesbian women and its impact can be exceptionally damaging (Cahn, 1994). Nonetheless, lesbian athletes, participating within the male-dominated world of sport, often maintain that it is safer to stay silent than to disclose their sexual identity (Lenskyj, 2003).

Aim of the chapter

The aim of the chapter is as follows:

1 To examine the coming out process of lesbian athletes through different climates of homophobia. By exploring the taxonomy of Griffin's climates (1998), it is possible to note the positive changes for lesbian athletes and their ability to come out.

Climates within a sporting environment

Griffin's (1998) taxonomy of climates for lesbian athletes (from hostile, through conditionally tolerant, to open and inclusive) can help analyse not only if lesbian athletes are able to come out, but also how they do so. Griffin (1998) denotes the hostile climate as one in which lesbian participation in sport is not just disapproved of, but completely forbidden. However, the hostility goes beyond simple secrecy surrounding lesbianism, but one where lesbians are actually blamed for issues within sport (Griffin, 1998), which creates problems for all women, as both homophobic and sexist attitudes are left unchallenged (Drury, 2011). Within a hostile environment in sport, lesbian women may fear coming out and, therefore, lesbian athletes keep their identity secret, ensuring that they 'maintain deep cover at all times' (Griffin, 1998, p. 253). It is in hostile environments that lesbian women use silence as a survival strategy (Elling et al., 2003; Lenskyj, 2003).

A hostile environment can be defined as any climate where athletes must resort to survival strategies such as silence, denial, or the projection of a feminised image in order to dismiss or minimise the lesbian label (Griffin, 1998). Research on specific sports shows particularly hostile individual environments. For example, some football (soccer) environments have been found to be highly homophobic where lesbians have experienced challenges with expressing their sexuality (Mennesson & Clément, 2003). Additionally, the Australian cricket environment in the 1990s has also been described as hostile to lesbians (Burroughs, Ashburn, & SeeBohm, 1995). Likewise, in the American collegiate sport system, two of 12 athletes interviewed by Anderson and Bullingham (2015) in their recent research reported homophobic language being used by players on their team.

While lesbian athletes are expected to remain in the closet in hostile climates, in conditionally tolerant climates, the closet becomes transparent (Griffin, 1998). Within a conditionally tolerant climate, the closet still exists but is made of glass instead, where lesbians 'keep their identities "secret" but everyone knows who they are' (Griffin, 1998, p. 100). Plymire and Forman (2001) acknowledge that in order to ensure media coverage and continued spectatorship, those involved in women's sport need to maintain clear boundaries confined within heterosexuality. Additionally, within sporting organisations, employees demonstrate conformity towards the norm of

heterosexuality, therefore silencing the lesbian issue (Melton & Cunningham, 2014).

Within a conditionally tolerant climate, the issue is not lesbian participation but rather their visibility within sport; lesbians are allowed to participate providing they subscribe to a set of rules (Griffin, 1998). This environment has more recently been described as 'don't ask, don't tell' (Anderson, 2002; Anderson & Bullingham, 2015), a policy implemented until recently within the US military. Within a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy, athletes may temporarily emerge from the closet to reveal their sexual identity, but after the revelation, normal play is resumed, with teammates ignoring the incident. Krane and Barber (2005) have also discovered this climate within US sports coaching environments.

In Anderson's (2002) first study of openly gay male athletes, he found that teams readily implemented 'don't ask, don't tell' policies. Of note within his study, gay male athletes remained oblivious to this environment, even defending its existence. Anderson (2002) discovered that this policy of 'don't ask, don't tell' was practised between homosexual and heterosexual players, but also *between* two homosexual athletes. Homosexual athletes themselves helped to reinforce this climate, also having to remain within the glass closet, as nobody would talk about their sexuality post revelation. Similar findings are outlined in Anderson and Bullingham's (2015) study of openly lesbian athletes. Again, athletes defended a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy, claiming that sport was not the right forum for a discussion on sexuality. Within a conditionally tolerant environment, lesbian athletes have to conform to a set of rules, which include silence surrounding their sexuality (Anderson & Bullingham, 2015).

Interestingly, Anderson (2002) found that gay male athletes were only condoned by the team if they conformed to a winning mentality and if the team were successful. Anderson (2005, p. 23) describes how 'masculine capital' aids the reception of the athletes who come out. He defines the masculine capital dynamic as: '… the more a male adheres to these traits the more he raises his masculine capital – his worth among other boys and men'. Anderson discovered in both his research of 2002 and 2005 that the more valuable the gay male player is to the team's success, the more likely it is that he will be accepted. Indeed, there was a distinct pattern between the athlete's importance to the team and how well they were received when they came out as gay (Anderson, 2002). Athletic ranking – otherwise known as athletic capital – relates to how integral a player is to the success of the team. Anderson (2002) found that 22 of the 26 openly gay male athletes he interviewed had high athletic capital. Thus, athletic capital may influence the decision to come out, especially within conditionally tolerant climates. Anderson (2002) also found in his initial study that athletes expected to face homophobia when they came out, either in the form of abuse or deselection from the team.

Since 2002, Anderson has updated his research on athletic capital. In 2011, Anderson found that athletes who came out did *not* expect to face any

homophobia from teammates. Perhaps most interestingly, in his follow-up study Anderson (2011b) found that athletic capital had been nullified, when it was no longer only the top athletes coming out, but fringe members of the team were also disclosing their sexuality. Research on female athletes' capital is limited, but Anderson and Bullingham (2015) found that all of the lesbians they interviewed were valuable to the team, with seven even labelling themselves the most valuable player. This research demonstrates that the possession of predisclosure, high athletic capital influences the decision to come out. Therefore, high athletic capital is also a currency and coping mechanism adopted by lesbian athletes to gain acceptance within a team.

Griffin's final category is an environment described as open and inclusive. This environment was viewed by Hargreaves (2000) as a distant dream for lesbian athletes in the 1990s. Where an open environment has been achieved, lesbian women have been able to express their identity freely, with some even using the sporting environment as a safe zone. Because of the high representation of lesbians within sport (Lenskyj, 2003), athletes have found mutually supportive lesbian communities within teams (Cahn, 1994; Griffin, 1998). However, this support mechanism only exists where athletes are 'out'. Griffin (1998) shows how high-profile lesbian athletes influence values and help educate others. Likewise, Melton and Cunningham (2014) note that when sportsmen and women come out, they create an opportunity to challenge preconceived ideas concerning human sexuality.

Some inclusive environments were uncovered by Fink, Burton, Farrell, and Parker (2012) in their study of the US collegiate system. Likewise, Hardy (2015) found a positive environment for female rugby players in Canada. Anderson, Magrath, and Bullingham (2016) showed that open and inclusive environments have also been found in women's recreational sport in the UK. Additionally, some improvements have been demonstrated within elite sport in general, but there is a need for further research in this area (Anderson, Magrath, & Bullingham, 2016).

Changing nature of coming out

Previous literature on athletes coming out has shown athletic capital to be important, not only in the athlete's initial decision to come out, but also on their acceptance within the team and sport (Anderson, 2002; Anderson & Bullingham, 2015). Essentially, the research demonstrates that the ethos of winning enables high quality and important homosexual players to gain acceptance, as they are essential to the success of the team, whereas those who are fringe players are rarely tolerated, as they lack importance to the team's success (Anderson, 2002, 2011; Anderson & Bullingham, 2015). Anderson's results show that, as cultural homophobia continues to decrease, the correlation between athletes' abilities and their acceptance has diminished in men's sport (Anderson, 2011a). However, lesbian athletes have historically shared different experiences to those of gay athletes; lesbian

athletes often find a supportive community among other closeted athletes within their sport (Griffin, 1998).

A 'coming out' story, male or female, used to be a significant event; athletes came out by wearing gay pride jewellery or making statements, like shouting out in the middle of a movie (Anderson, 2002; Anderson & Bullingham, 2015). Regardless of the circumstances, it was clearly an event that athletes could vividly recall. However, since the 1990s, there has been a significant cultural shift in terms of decreasing homophobia (Clements & Field, 2014). This decline has been linked to increased access to the internet, increased visibility of gay athletes and celebrities, and more athletes choosing to come out, which have led to a more open and inclusive environment (Anderson, 2011a).

In Anderson's initial study on gay male athletes (2002), he found that some athletes remained closeted owing to the homophobia demonstrated by their teammates. Women, in the meantime, faced the 'lesbian' label. Such fears not only secured the closet doors, they also saw female athletes idealise and assume feminine characteristics, in order to distance themselves from lesbian suspicion (Blinde & Taub, 1992; Griffin, 1998; Lenskyj, 2003; Wright & Clarke, 1999). In this way, labels have historically been used as a political tool for controlling female athletes (Griffin, 1998). Cahn (1994) describes how numerous participants refused to subscribe to either the 'gay' or 'lesbian' label. Instead, they hid their relationships by suggesting they had a 'roommate' – a process described as survival strategy (Cahn, 1994). However, the more recent dismissal of binary labels has changed matters. As Better (2014, p. 32) explains, 'Sexuality for women today is fluid and evolving'. Correspondingly, athletes may define their sexuality in a number of different ways, not necessarily ascribing to the lesbian label.

Griffin notes that open female athletes are 'out and proud' (1998, p. 152), wearing symbols of their sexual identity, while at the same time actively advocating their position in teams and society. However, with more people publicly owning their sexual identity, combined with decreasing cultural homophobia, it may be that coming out has become a non-event – perhaps even normalised. Athletes can now come out quietly, without the need to make a big political statement (Anderson, Magrath, & Bullingham, 2016). In fact, research has shown that some lesbian athletes did not even know when, or indeed how, their teammates found out they were gay, as their coming out was deemed insignificant, with no party or preplanning required (Anderson, Magrath, & Bullingham, 2016).

Research on lesbian athletes competing in team sports has previously shown high levels of homophobia from teammates, coaches, and administration (Anderson & Bullingham, 2015; Fink et al., 2012; Griffin, 1998). More recent research in this domain has mirrored findings from men's team sports, indicating decreasing levels of homophobia (Anderson, Magrath, & Bullingham, 2016); this has, in turn, resulted in increasing numbers of female athletes coming out of the closet. In addition, the value of athletic capital in

acceptance of lesbian athletes has also diminished. Previously, athletes who came out were shown to be more accepted where they had a tangible benefit on the team's success (Anderson, 2002; Anderson & Bullingham, 2015). However, research in recreational sport has found that athletic capital has ceased to be a factor in coming out among both gay and lesbian athletes (Anderson, Magrath, & Bullingham, 2016).

Athletic capital had previously been shown to be important for both gay and lesbian athletes coming out within a sporting environment (Anderson, 2002; Anderson & Bullingham, 2015). Although Anderson's (2011a) updated study demonstrates a significant decline in the importance of athletic capital for men, it was nevertheless still evident. It could be argued that athletic capital will always remain essential for those competing at the highest level of sport; within elite sport, performance is ascribed a higher value, since sporting success is the most important outcome. But, this does not mean that high athletic capital is required to come out in highly-supportive environments within recreational environments (Anderson, Magrath, & Bullingham, 2016). However, it should be noted that 17 openly lesbian women competed in the semi-finals of the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup. Additionally, Outsports has noted that, while there were 23 out athletes (both men and women) at London 2012, there were 56 at the Rio Olympics in 2016, showing continued improvement in the climates of both male and female athletes.

Research has shown that athletes are no longer afraid to come out; therefore, it can be proposed that the lesbian label has lost its damaging and pejorative association (Anderson, Magrath, & Bullingham, 2016). This change could be due to women's increasing sexual fluidity (as identified by Better, 2014). It could also be argued that the negative impact of the lesbian label has dissipated. For example, if athletes no longer conceptualise sexuality in its binary form of heterosexuality and homosexuality, supporting recent research findings (e.g., Better, 2014), then sexuality can be considered more fluid. The fluidity of sexuality expressed and presented by the women in this study mirrors findings from the more abundant research on male athletes (Anderson & Adams, 2011) and their increasing willingness to describe themselves as something beyond the hetero-/homosexual binary.

Practical recommendations

In 1998 Griffin wrote about the 'unplayable lies' needed to be overcome to allow women to compete in sport. She also provided strategies to support sport changing. She outlined the key factors that needed to be implemented: education, information, legislation, institutionalisation, connection, agitation, and visibility. A number of Griffin's suggestions were evident in a recent British government report (Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2017). This report noted the importance of the visibility of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual (LGBT) community through initiatives such as the *Rainbow Lace Campaign* – a way for everyone involved in sport to show their support for LGBT

equality and inclusivity. Additionally, the significance of education is acknowledged as essential in terms of training, advice, and support from grassroots to national level sport (Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2017). Finally, there is an urgent need for more research at all levels of competitive team sport as well as for the individual exercising female to ensure we continue to understand how best to support this population in the sporting environment.

Real-world examples

Although research has shown significant improvements within male sporting culture, women's sport is more complex, since women who play sport challenge gender norms and, therefore, often face both sexism and homosexual suspicion through participation (Griffin, 1998; Lenskyj, 1995). The number of high-profile men coming out has not impacted on the level of homophobia in women's sport at any point (Griffin, 2012). In the 1980s, both Martina Navratilova and Billie Jean King (both retired professional tennis players) were outed (the sexuality was revealed by someone else). As a result, they promptly lost sponsorship and gained negative media coverage (Forman & Plymire, 2005; Hargreaves, 2000). Since coming out in 1999, Amélie Mauresmo (retired professional tennis player) received negative coverage from her fellow players and came under intense scrutiny from all sections of society (Forman & Plymire, 2005; Tredway, 2014). Prior to coming out, the situation was no better; Hargreaves (2000) describes how Mauresmo regularly faced derogatory remarks with constant inferences that she was a lesbian. Indeed, a media analysis by Forman and Plymire (2005) showed evidence of her muscular body causing alarm and even panic. They concluded that, rather than being portrayed as a 'lesbian hero', Mauresmo appears to be more of an 'underdog hero' (Forman & Plymire, 2005, p. 121). The underdog hero is described as 'someone to root for' who might achieve against all the odds (Forman & Plymire, 2005, p. 130).

Despite negative media coverage and disparaging remarks from fellow professionals, such as Martina Hingis (who attracted negative crowd reactions as a result; see Krane & Barber, 2003), Mauresmo continued to be sponsored by Nike, Inc., amassing career earnings of around US$7,000,000 (Forman & Plymire, 2005). In fact, rather than covering up Mauresmo's body, her clothing sponsors, Nike, Inc., actively encouraged her to reveal her muscular physique and designed clothing specifically to expose her athletic build (Forman & Plymire, 2005). This change in approach caused Tredway (2014) to re-examine the heterosexual matrix with its failure to acknowledge openly lesbian athletes. However, her adaptation fails to account for openly lesbian athletes who do not acknowledge their muscularity. As Tredway (2014, p. 175) explains: 'Once we know that a woman is a lesbian, we are prepared, even eager, to reread her physique in masculine terms, presumably because lesbians are socially coded as masculine'. However, athletes who have come out in more recent times do not always fit this notion of masculine social coding.

Sheryl Swoopes, who was the first player to be signed to the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) in America, can be considered one of the most prominent female athletes, having won the most valuable player award on three occasions and featuring in the Hall of Fame. She came out in a magazine article in 2005 while at the height of her career in the WNBA (Chawansky & Francombe, 2011). In order to prevent any potential damage to her career earnings, Swoopes signed a sponsorship deal with a holiday company aimed at the lesbian travel market (Chawansky & Francombe, 2011). The timing of her coming out demonstrates awareness of previous negative experiences faced by lesbian athletes. As Anderson (2002) discusses, the most valuable player status on a team helps with acceptance of (homo) sexuality. Swoopes was not only the most important person on the team, but the most valuable player in the entire league. This high athletic capital guaranteed her place on the team, and she also had the foresight to organise additional endorsements prior to coming out. In fact, she cited this contract with the lesbian travel firm as an influential factor in facilitating her coming out of the closet (Chawansky & Francombe, 2011). Swoopes' career hit a low in 2009 when she was not offered a new WNBA contract. After a short break from the sport, she returned in 2011 (Ogden & Rose, 2013). In the two years out of the sport, she has seemingly split with her female partner and become engaged to a man (Ogden & Rose, 2013). This was a significant development, since she had originally come out as a lesbian and not bisexual. This example could link to the argument of Better (2014), who acknowledges the complexity of the categories of sexuality, particularly in its binary form, and notes changing sexual fluidity of women.

In England in 2013, field hockey players, Kate Walsh and Helen Richardson announced they were getting married to very little press coverage, despite both players competing for the same domestic and international team – a unique media angle, which has yet to be analysed by an academic peer-reviewed journal. An article on the BBC Sport website noted how understated the event: '… sparked little coverage beyond congratulations. There was no discussion – the players said none was needed' (Williams, 2014). This was despite Kate Walsh previously having been in a relationship with Brett Garrard (England and Team GB's most capped male hockey player), with their relationship being described as 'The Posh and Becks' of hockey (Harris, 2013). Walsh and Richardson received an overwhelming positive reaction to their civil partnership, but still found it difficult initially to make the relationship public (Harris, 2013). Interestingly, Helen Richardson-Walsh's exclusion from the World Cup and Commonwealth Games in 2014 and then subsequent inclusion for the World League semi-final appeared to spark more media interest then the Richardson–Walsh civil partnership (Archer, 2015; Wilson, 2014).

Casey Stoney, a retired footballer who represented England, Team GB, and played league football, came out in 2014, announcing that she was in a relationship with another footballer. Since coming out, her partner has given

birth to their three children – events that attracted significant media coverage. Stoney has openly acknowledged the positive reception she received as a result of coming out, but has also made public the anonymous abuse she received on Twitter (Steinberg, 2014). Interestingly, this invisibility is also indicative of an inclusive society, since so-called Twitter trolls tweet behind a cloak of anonymity, enabling them to challenge culturally declining homophobia without fear of personal repercussions. Her decision to come out was aided by the reception that British diver, Tom Daley, received when he came out. Indeed, Stoney was quick to acknowledge that Daley's experience helped her make the decision (McCloskey, 2014). Since coming out she continued to play for England before retiring and recently being appointed as the manager of Manchester United's women's team.

Summary

This chapter has examined the climates of homophobia that women engaged in competitive organised team sports have faced from the 1980s onwards. Using Griffin's (1998) climates as a framework, it has been possible to show the changes in climate from the hostility of the 1980s through to the more inclusive climate of today. Additionally, the changing nature of the process of coming out has been analysed. Previously, athletes needed high athletic capital to ensure acceptance in sporting contexts and, in many cases, coming out was making a statement. More recently, gay and lesbian athletes of all abilities have been able to safely come out in a climate that is open and inclusive. However, there is clearly a need for research and further work to be conducted with lesbian women competing at the elite level as well as those exercising females outside the competitive, organised, team sport arena.

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