

Openly lesbian team sport athletes in an era of decreasing homophobia

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Abstract

Sociologists who have examined the issue of lesbians in American sport in the 1980s and 1990s normally found overt and covert mechanisms of social discrimination. However, homophobia has been on a rapid decline over previous decades, and studies show attitudes toward female homosexuality in sport have improved since the research conducted on lesbian athletes in the mid-1990s. This article uses data collected between that epoch and current studies to analyze athletic narratives of openly lesbian team sport athletes in 2002. We find no universal pattern for the treatment of openly lesbian athletes existed in this era of decreasing homophobia. However, as with gay men in sport at the time, athletic capital influenced who came out, and heterosexism was prominent.

Keywords

athletes, heteronormativity, homophobia, lesbians, sport

Introduction

Sociologists examining the issue of lesbians in sport during the 1980s and 1990s agreed that organized team sports were normally characterized as highly homophobic organizational cultures (Griffin, 1998; Hekma, 1998; Lenskyj, 1986; Sykes, 1998; Veri, 1999). However, since 1993 (Loftus, 2001) homophobia has been in rapid decline, both within sport and society more broadly (Anderson, 2009, 2011a, 2011c; McCormack, 2012). By the new millennium, attitudes had changed dramatically—this is particularly the case for youth (Keleher and Smith, 2012).

Research on ostensibly heterosexual female undergraduate athletic teams conducted in the first part of the second decade of this century shows growing cultures of acceptance. For example, Fink et al. (2012) show that improvements in educationally based sports teams can provide a ‘safe zone’ for lesbian athletes to be open about their sexuality;

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Melton and Cunningham (2012) also find lesbian athletes of color supported by teammates; and Cunningham et al. (in press) shows that as heterosexism declines, support for lesbians increases in sport. However, there is a 'missing decade' (1999–2011) in which we can find no literature on openly lesbian athletes in the United States, or other English-speaking nations, competing in predominately heterosexual teams. In using data collected in 2002, contextualizing the results with Anderson's (2002) study of the experiences of openly gay male high school and undergraduate athletes, this study addresses this gap.

Results largely concur with what Anderson found in men's sport, with the notable exception of finding elevated hostility compared with men's teams. We suggest this might arise from heterosexual female teammates' fear of being socially lesbianized because of their openly lesbian teammate/s—something Anderson describes as homophobia (2009, 2011b), yet something he does not find occurring among heterosexual men in sport after a teammate comes out (2002, 2005, 2011a). This article therefore helps us more fully understand the evolving relationship between lesbians and team sports in American sporting culture during a cultural zeitgeist of decreasing but not diminished homophobia and homophobia.

Orthodox notions of heterosexual femininity in sport

Heterosexual females participating in competitive team sports often find that their heterosexuality is called into question (Kwiatkowski, 1998; McDonagh and Pappano, 2008), something that does not happen for men who play competitive team sports (Anderson, 2005). It is perhaps for this reason that much of the hostility toward lesbian athletes comes from heterosexual female athletes, whose own challenging of gender norms brings cultural resistance from male athletes and female non-athletes in the form of a stigmatized association of female athletic competency with lesbianism (Cox and Thompson, 2001; Krane, 2001).

Once labeled lesbian (regardless of one's sexual orientation), women frequently face overt and covert forms of discrimination (Griffin, 1998). Accordingly, female athletes who challenge the norms of femininity by playing competitive team sport often use homophobia in order to distance themselves from being thought lesbian (Lenskyj, 2003; McDonagh and Pappano, 2008; Veri, 1999). A less overt mechanism of distancing oneself from what Griffin (1998: 59) calls 'the lesbian bogeywoman' comes through heterosexual women emphasizing their femininity to consolidate their own heterosexual identities (Felshin, 1974).

In order to distance themselves from being socially perceived as lesbian, female athletes wear feminine clothing, jewelry, and makeup, despite its impracticality (Krane, 2001). Griffin (1998) gives the example of a female basketball coach pacing the paraffin courtside lines wearing high heels and a miniskirt, suggesting that coaches do this because sporting women who do not hyper-feminize themselves face increased suspicion regarding their sexuality (Cox and Thompson, 2001). This gendered phenomenon is described as an apologetic (Felshin, 1974), and it exists as a homophobic tool of marginalization to police orthodox gender roles.

The majority of research on lesbian American women in sport was carried out in the 1980s and 1990s, an era Anderson (2009) describes as being not only high in

homophobia, but also homophobia, which he summarizes as a “homosexually-panicked culture in which suspicion [of homosexuality] permeates” (Anderson, 2011c: 7). Anderson argues that cultural homophobia in America escalated rapidly in the mid-1980s, partially as a result of heightened cultural homophobia that combined with the HIV/AIDS epidemic and a revival of fundamentalist Christianity. This means that there was a cultural awareness that homosexuality existed as a stable orientation within a sizeable percent of the American population, who was ‘morally’ opposed to it, and heterosexuals feared being thought a sexual minority.

However, Anderson further describes that homophobia is not just a descriptor for a macro-level culture; it can also be a condition of an organizational, or institutional culture: a heuristic for conceptualizing the use of stigma against homosexuality. Importantly, an organizational culture can be homophobic independent of a broader culture; a team can be described as homophobic, for example, even if the broader culture has moved on. Such a culture would be characterized by a saliency in casting homosexual suspicion onto others for gender-atypical behaviors.

A growing body of work has documented the power of homophobia both in understanding when homophobia regulates gendered behaviors and also for understanding the change in gendered behaviors when homophobia decreases (Adams, 2011; Adams and Anderson, 2011; Anderson et al., 2012; McCormack, 2011a). While Anderson (2009, 2011a) developed homophobia in relation to men’s gendered behaviors, we argue that it is equally applicable to women in sport, and that although not recognized as such, a plethora of research already documents the conditions of homophobia within female sporting cultures from the 1980s (Hargreaves, 2000). For example, as previously mentioned, Lenskyj (2003) suggests that both heterosexual and closeted women fear lesbianization in sport, something Griffin (1998: 59) describes as ‘the lesbian bogeywoman.’ The predictive power of homophobia means that as homophobia decreases, so should the intensity by which women defend their own sexuality and cast others as stigmatized.

It is also probable that organizational homophobia is higher among women’s teams with openly lesbian athletes than teams without. This is because the presence of openly lesbian players potentially casts further suspicion on the heterosexuality of other teammates (Griffin, 1998). Such is the prevalence of homophobia, and the stigma of being thought lesbian, that female athletes have been shown to fear being called dykes more than whores (Blinde and Taub, 1992). As a result, both lesbian and heterosexual athletes are subject to social prejudice and discrimination.

A homophobic environment has consequences for the experience of openly lesbian athletes. As heterosexual athletes symbolically distance themselves from lesbians, it generates further othering, and perhaps further hostility (Lenskyj, 2003). Lesbian athletes thus find themselves further othered members of an already othered group, stigmatized by society for their gender, their choice to pursue sport, and their sexual orientation (Lenskyj, 2003).

The existence of homophobia among women in sport does more than just marginalize lesbian athletes, however; it also re/produces heteronormativity, invoking a societal hierarchy that privileges heterosexuality (Calhoun et al., 2011). Sykes (1998) explains that the fear of lesbianization in women’s sport facilitates the silencing of homosexuality in sport, permitting heterosexuality to remain unchallenged; and Hargreaves (1994: 194) shows that

media portrayal of female athletes reinforces an image of heterosexuality, stating that 'sexualized images' are used with supporting statements about femininity and marital status. Fusco (1998) agrees, adding that even when openly lesbian players do exist, a lack of admiration for them also permits compulsory heterosexuality to continue unchallenged.

Still, there is no monolithic athletic culture. Even in the 1990s Griffin (1998) showed that there were different types of sport environments for women, describing the continuum of women's sports teams as ranging from hostile, to conditionally tolerant, to open; and other research on prejudice by coaches (Cunningham, 2007; Sartore and Cunningham, 2009) shows matters improving. Still, we cannot identify any research on the experience of openly lesbian American undergraduate athletes between Griffin's (1998) study, which showed that compulsory heterosexuality was required in educationally based athletic culture, and the more recent investigations of 2012 (Cunningham et al., in press; Fink et al., 2012; Melton and Cunningham, 2012). This article therefore helps fill this void, examining the experiences of openly lesbian team sport players in 2002, comparing them with the experiences of men in this epoch, and contextualizing the results through a lens of homophobia.

Method

Participants

In 2002 Anderson published a study on openly gay athletes in sport, particularly concerning social and institutional variables that impacted upon their experiences. Alongside this data collection, he also interviewed lesbian athletes. This data has not, until now, however been formulated for publication. Accordingly, in this article the same semi-structured interview schedule used in Anderson's (2002) study was utilized with 12 self-identified lesbian athletes from a variety of college teams in North America.

The lesbian athletes represented in this research are located on teams that are neither known for being 'lesbian teams,' nor teams that outright prohibited their attendance. All of the athletes were found through the use of the internet, list-serves, websites, and college resource centers' electronic bulletin boards, or through snowball sampling.

Criteria for participation in the study included: 1) athletes had to have participated in high school or college athletic team(s) for 2 years before the study was conducted; 2) they had to have been aware of their homosexual orientation at the time they played and been out to most of the members on their team; 3) they must have competed in the sport for at least one full season; and (4) bisexual athletes were not included. The athletes played the following sports: basketball (2), rowing (1), cross country (1), rugby (1), soccer (2), softball (4), and track (1). They came from regions throughout the United States but, unlike Anderson's study of gay male athletes, he was only able to locate openly lesbian university athletes, not high school players.

Procedures and analysis

Interviews were scheduled to last 90 minutes, and the participants were asked to secure a place to talk that ensured privacy. Interviews ranged between 40 and 90 minutes, averaging

50 minutes. All were taped and transcribed by Anderson, who used a semi-structured interviewing approach that began by asking the athlete to discuss how they first knew they were lesbian and also how they became involved in sport. Questions progressed to cover issues related to coming out to teammates and coaches, and a number of questions about the lived experience as an openly lesbian athlete.

While interviews were transcribed in 2002, Anderson did not, however, code this research. Coding took place in 2012 by both authors independently and our analysis is derived from co-verifying these codes until there was general agreement about the themes presented. With only 12 interviews 100% of the interviews were cross-verified, with all coding subject to inter-rater reliability. As a starting guideline, we structured our coding according to the same themes of Anderson's (2002) research on openly gay male athletes, while remaining open to emerging themes. There were no significant differences concerning our open or axial coding, nor were themes significantly different from those in Anderson's (2002) research.

Ethics

All ethical procedures of the American Sociological Association have been adhered to. Accordingly, all participants gave informed consent for this research and their personal names and institutional affiliations have been made anonymous. Athletes were, at the time of interview, given right to withdraw from the research, and provided with details about the nature of the research. They were also given the right to review and amend transcripts, although none did.

Results

Results from this study are broadly consistent with Anderson's (2002) research conducted on openly gay male athletes. This assertion is principally made in that 10 of the 12 athletes reported little resistance to their coming out. In fact, most of the athletes reported having strong support from their teammates.

Danielle, a college soccer player, said that she came out to her teammates while watching a movie in one of her teammate's apartments after practice. "I remember it perfectly, we were watching *Chocolat*. A total chic-flick, right? And you know it's all about like a conservative town and a liberated woman. So really, the timing was perfect I thought." Danielle said that once she determined that tonight would be the night to tell her friends, she could not stop thinking about it. "We weren't even halfway through the movie and I'm like, stop! I have to tell you guys something. I'm gay..." She added:

There was an awkward moment and then my best friend hugged me. In retrospect, it's pretty weird, shouting it out that way!...But they have been so supportive of me, that they even went to some gay pride events with me. I guess you could say that I've been extremely lucky...

Danielle was not the only participant to receive such support. Cynthia, a cross country runner, was preparing to go to a friend's party with her teammates. She told her teammates that her friend hosting the party was lesbian, and that there would be lesbian

women at the party. "I thought they suspected I was lesbian, and they were so nonchalant about going to this lesbian party with me that I just did it." Moments before entering the party, Cynthia told her teammates: "You know how I said there would be a number of lesbians at the party? Well, I'm one of them." She added:

The shocked looks on their faces was totally priceless. But they quickly assured me that they weren't making fun of the gayness of the event. They just had no idea I was one of the lesbians I was talking about....

Cynthia added, "The girls surprised me that night, not treating me any differently than they had before... here I thought that they likely suspected I was lesbian, but they had no clue. This didn't change anything though."

Michelle's coming out was equally positive; she came out to her team halfway through the season:

The rest of the season was just as it was before. There was no difference really. Then the next year we had an entirely new team...they have all been very cool when I mention my girlfriend, and I haven't felt any tension or uneasiness from them...my coach even asks how she's doing... I feel very comfortable with them.

The supportive narratives that nine of the 12 participants express raise two important issues. First, is that the 'good' experience the athletes report may be attributable to reverse relative deprivation, something that Anderson found in operation with openly gay male athletes in 2002. Here, whereas people normally compare themselves with those who have it better, these athletes may be comparing themselves with those who have it worse. Thus, when Danielle said, "I've been extremely lucky" or Cynthia said, "The girls surprised me that night, not treating me any different," they reveal the possibility that they expected things would be worse after coming out. This may, as Anderson found with openly gay male athletes (2002), artificially inflate the belief that all is well, when discrimination may still be present. This suggestion also highlights a weakness with our data; there was no ethnographic component so we rely solely on participants recall.

The second point, one raised by Michelle, is that that coming out process is never over for openly lesbian athletes. Educationally based sport teams lose about 25% of their teammates each year, gaining 25% new members. Coming out is therefore a continual process: there is always a new crew to come out to. While this research did not adequately investigate whether or not an already established lesbian player's coming out to freshman athletes is less problematic than coming out initially, it is possible that an existing team's acceptance of a lesbian athlete goes uncontested by new members of the team, who normally adopt the previous team's ethics. This, at least, is what Anderson found in a follow-up study to his research on gay male athletes in (2011c).

Overt hostility

As with Hekma's (1998) research on gay and lesbian athletes, and Anderson's (2002) study of gay male athletes, overt homophobia was less apparent than researchers

might have predicted. However, unlike Andersons' (2002) study of 26 openly gay males, this study revealed cases of overt hostility and two cases of athletes being called a 'dyke' by one or more players on their team (with intent to wound). This contrasts with none of the openly gay men in Anderson's (2002) study being called a 'fag' with intent to wound (see McCormack, 2011b for the significance of mal-intent and homophobic language).

Amy, a college softball player, had the most disturbing experience. She felt totally unaccepted on her team from the moment she came out. Evidencing her claim, she said that she emerged late from practice one evening because her female coach held her over to discuss not being happy about her short hair. When she returned to her car, she found that all four of her car tires were flattened, her back window was smashed, and her windshield cracked. Worse, a note was left on her car's windshield, 'die dyke.' While Amy does not know for certain that it was her teammates that were responsible for the damage, she suspected so because she hypothesized that nobody else would have known it was her car. She also believed that her coach collaborated with her teammates. Not only did the coach hold Amy over after practice, but when Amy returned to her coach's office to report the damage, she replied, "Well what do you expect when you tell people that sort of thing?"

Further evidence of direct intolerance from teammates came from Amy's first overnight trip with teammates. Although there were four women assigned to a room, each with two double beds (standard practice in many American sporting teams), no athlete would share a bed with Amy, instead deciding to sleep on the floor. Referring to this situation, Amy said, "Let's just say that I got a really good night's sleep." The same situation occurred on subsequent trips. Amy said, "There was either someone on the floor or three people in one bed, every night."

The social isolation and residual fear that her car was vandalized by her teammates influenced Amy to leave the team, something she described as having been "run off the team." She articulated that she left the sport because of her teammates' hostility and a lack of intervention by the coach. Amy was not the only one to suffer overt homophobia, however.

Monique, a college basketball player, was frequently called a dyke by other teammates in her locker room. Despite this direct hostility however, Monique nonetheless framed her experience with language reflective of the fact that matters were not so awful. She said "No real hostility" came from them. The use of the word 'real' however, reflects other events in Monique's university experience. She was sexually assaulted by a member of the men's football team [we are unclear where on campus this occurred]. "One of the guys picked me up and gave me the nastiest kiss on the back of my neck. I used all of my strength to fight him off, but I couldn't. He asked, 'still Lesbian now?'"

Despite this assault, Monique did not file charges. She said that another lesbian friend had filed charges with the school over a similar incident by a football player and nothing had happened to the perpetrator (Crosset et al., 1995). Instead, Monique told her coach, who talked to the football coach about the situation, which ended the harassment, but left the perpetrator unpunished.

In light of this event, we argue that Monique uses the word *real* in an important contextual manner. That is to say, there was no 'real' hostility from her teammates compared with the experience she had by this football player. It is in this comparison that linguistic or covert mechanisms of social discrimination may not seem 'as bad.'

The link between athletic capital and coming out

Results from these interviews also suggest that students with high athletic capital might also have had an easier time coming out of the closet during this epoch because of their value to the team. Only one of the participants directly articulated this, saying, "I figured it would be fine because, you know, the team needs me." When others were asked about their talent levels, however, they also indicated that they knew that they, too, were valuable to their team's success. In discussions with the players, all 12 were judged to be valuable to their teams because they were either starters or key players. Seven of the dozen even described themselves as the team's top player. In Anderson's (2002) study of gay male high/school and collegiate athletes, it was found that 22 of the 26 had high athletic capital, compared with only five of the 16 closeted athletes studied. Thus, athletic capital might have, and may still, influence who comes out and who does not in sport.

To fully appreciate these numbers, one must realize that the numbers of total athletes on any given team is likely to comprise of more low and medium capable athletes than high, and there can, of course, only be only one most valuable player on a team. The sampling technique should not be held accountable for the large number of high athletic capital athletes in this study either, as an athlete's level of ability was not part of the selection criteria; athletes were not asked about their ability before the interviews took place.

Compared with openly gay male athletes, however (Anderson, 2002), female athletes seemed only tangentially aware of their talent as a factor in enabling them to come out. When asked if they thought they would have been as likely to come out if they were not good, many answered similar to Holly, "I suppose so. But then if I wasn't that good, maybe I wouldn't be as part of the team and wouldn't feel I needed to come out." Another said, "If I weren't good at my sport, I might still come out, yeah. But then maybe not. It's hard to say without being there."

Finding that athletes with high athletic capital are more likely to come out to teammates (whether consciously aware or not) than those without high athletic capital, might reflect the culture of 2002; one in which homophobia was declining but still recognizing that declining homophobia is an uneven social process. Alternatively, these results might reflect a condition of lesbian athletes of average athletic ability dropping out of sport, the way as Hekma (1998) found with community-based athletes, before achieving this level of play. While this sample size is too small to draw general conclusions about the correlation between being out and having high athletic capital, it is possible that as cultural homophobia has decreased since this research, more average and below-average lesbian athletes will be coming out, the way Anderson (2011c) shows has happened with gay male athletes.

Having high athletic capital may also influence the type and degree of discrimination athletes experience once they do come out to their teams. It is not, however, an all-influencing variable. Amy had high athletic capital on her squad, yet she was harassed and her car vandalized. In Amy's case, the coach's attitude seemed to be more important.

The coach's attitude

Griffin (1998) has suggested that the coach's attitude is likely to be a significant influence in the type of experience an openly lesbian athlete will have on her team. This study

found the coach continued to be significant in 2002. For example, although Angela reports that her college coach was very supportive of her being a lesbian, this was not the case with her high school coach:

My coach knew I was gay, but never suspected it with my girlfriend, her other star. So I guess she began hearing stuff and called my girlfriend into their office and basically asked her was all this true. My girlfriend denied it at the time. The worst part, however, was that my [high school] coach then began to make her feel bad about the whole thing, and telling her that she was glad it wasn't true because a 'nice girl from a nice family' couldn't dare be like that. It just made her feel bad for being with me.

Players often did not want their coach to know that they were lesbian. Denise, for example, was out to all the players on her team, but none told their coach. When asked why, she responded, "He's an older gentlemen of the Catholic belief and he's pretty set in his ways." Still, other coaches were supportive of their lesbian athletes. Kelly says that her coach was so supportive that at, one team social, Kelly's coach went around to the young men attending with the female players and said in a light-hearted manner, "So what are your intentions with my daughter?" He then approached the female date Kelly had brought and said the precise same thing in the exact same tone.

Cynthia said that the best experience she had as an openly lesbian athlete on her team was the fact that her coach asked her about her girlfriend. "Whether he knew it or not, he validated my relationship with her, and let me know that he can acknowledge who I am with some level of comfort."

Jennifer chose to play basketball for her university because the coach was known to be lesbian, something she found out when other coaches tried to recruit her to play for their programs. They asked her what other schools she was looking at attending, she would tell them, and they would often say, "Oh you don't want to go to that school, the coach is a lesbian." This practice is well recognized within the sporting literature as negative recruiting (Griffin, 1998). The strategy, however, did not work on Jennifer. She said, "It was important for me to go somewhere where I would really feel comfortable talking to my coach." What she found after arriving at her university was not what she hoped. Her coach was somewhat affirming of her relationship privately, but she never spoke publicly to her players about her own or Jennifer's sexual orientation publicly and attempted to silence Jennifer's sexuality to minimize negative recruiting.

Heterosexism

One of the most common forms of discrimination presented itself in the form of *don't ask, don't tell*. It is this experience that Jennifer had on her team, despite having an openly lesbian coach. The attitude reflects a 'we know it exists, but we are not going to recognize it or talk about it' mantra on the teams of many of the athletes interviewed. In the case of Jennifer, it was perhaps facilitated by her coach who was known to be lesbian, but never spoke of it.

Athletes in this study were mostly complicit in *don't ask, don't tell*. They normally excused their lack of discussion about their sexual orientation by saying, "Sport is not the

appropriate place for such discussions” or, “Well, it’s none of their business.” For example, Jennifer said that despite the fact that her coach is a lesbian, she tried to limit the visibility of Jennifer’s being out. “My coaches have these rules for what I can do and what I can’t do,” she said. Jennifer said that the coaches are afraid that their being “too out” will result in the team requiring a “bad” name. Jennifer only partly resisted her silencing. She said, “Me and my girlfriend would be walking down campus holding hands, but as soon as we get near the P.E. department, we split up.”

Rhonda, too, played softball for a team with a lesbian coach. But despite this, Rhonda felt that her coach tried to pretend it was a non-issue with her:

While I was on the team, I was out to everyone, considering I dated a girl on the team and everyone knew about it. Although I was out and everyone knew, oddly enough my coach, who was a lesbian, tried to act like it was a non-issue. I never really agreed with that mentality.

It is possible that Rhonda’s coach pretended it was a non-issue in order to normalize it, but it is also possible that she did so out of the cultural mandate of heterosexism, which labels any discussion of homosexuality as being “in your face” (Ripley et al., 2012). This perspective is evidenced when Rhonda says:

The worst experience was my first year. The team became very discriminatory towards myself, both as a person and a player on the team. While on a road trip in New Mexico, I was basically excluded from any activities that were not a team function. I began to feel very isolated and when I talked to my coach about it, her advice was to try and not be with my girlfriend so much around them. She basically told us to separate. Thing is, had we just been ‘best friends’ none of this would have happened. I got to the point where I almost wanted to leave the team.

Cathy, an athletics sprinter, met no overt hostility but was socially excluded from team activities:

I get excluded from certain things that are going on...and that’s just the way it is. Sometimes when my teammates see me eating in the cafeteria with my friends, they won’t come sit with us because they don’t want to eat at the lesbian table.

Denise, also found that her team adopted a *don’t ask, don’t tell* policy. She said that all of the girls on her team know she is gay, but they do not seem to talk much about it. She said about one of her friends, “The fact that I’m gay doesn’t seem to make a difference to her, although we never really talk about it either.” She added:

The most positive thing I can think of is that I wasn’t shunned. I was accepted. Although at times it felt like a *don’t ask don’t tell* kind of thing, it was okay. I can see how the subject of one being a gay person can make a straight person uncomfortable, especially if your changing (locker room) with her.

It can be argued that silencing may reflect a covert way of addressing the issue, just like those who favor race-neutral policies championed affirmative action. However, silencing may also reflect a covert institutional and cultural heterosexual hegemony (Sykes, 1998) in which lesbian athletes are denied from speaking as freely about their

personal life as heterosexual athletes. Silencing mostly reflects a covert form of hegemonic oppression that often leads the athletes to feel that they should not discuss their sexuality, despite the fact that discussions of heterosexuality are all around them (Anderson, 2002, 2005).

Discussion

This 2002 investigation into the experiences of lesbians in sport augments the relevant sociological literature because it addresses a gap in research concerning the experiences of openly lesbian athletes between 1998 and 2012. Results were mostly similar to that of Anderson's 2002 study on the experiences of gay men in sport, with the exception of finding some (limited) overt hostility. Thus, differing types and intensities of homophobia existed alongside acceptance and limited social inclusion.

This research therefore captured the experience of openly lesbian athletes in a general epoch of declining, but still existent homophobia. Here, the presence of an openly lesbian athlete was most frequently met with partial inclusion. Outside overt hostility, the primary bias presented itself in the covert manner of a *don't ask, don't tell* heterosexist cultural practice, the same that Anderson (2002) found with male athletes of the time. In this culture, the lesbian athletes' sexuality is not treated on par with the heterosexual athletes. This is thought to be a reflection of both wider institutional and sporting-cultural heterosexism. In fact, lesbian coaches oftentimes helped enforce this hegemony by modeling their own complicity and attempting to silence their lesbian players' identities.

While the self-silencing of lesbian coaches is certainly part of the problem of heterosexual dominance, the coaches do not necessarily desire to reproduce this culture. Instead coaches adhere to heterosexist practices out of fear of retribution. It is likely that they feared that being out in sport would give their program a 'bad name' and believed that self-silencing would limit heterosexual hostility and negative recruiting. These findings are consistent with the corpus of earlier work on the issue (Griffin, 1998). We theorize these findings through the lens of homophobia because heterosexual teammates fear social lesbianization should others find out about the presence of even one openly lesbian athlete.

Also, similar to gay male athletes of the time, lesbian athletes were shown to upgrade their self-perception of their social standing through a process of what Anderson (2002) calls reverse relative deprivation. Although these lesbian athletes have not been fully accepted onto their teams, because (most) had not been dismissed from their teams or severely ostracized by teammates, most athletes therefore described their experience as a positive one—believing that matters could have been much worse. Thus, their perceptions of tolerance are mitigated by fear of overt hostility.

The final similarity with Anderson's (2002) study on gay male athletes is that all the players interviewed had high athletic capital. Seven of the women interviewed described themselves as the most important player on the team, and the other five were of average athletic capital. None maintained low athletic capital to the team. Generally the athletes with high athletic capital are essential to the team's success and therefore are less likely to face discrimination.

However, there were also significant differences between the research projects on men's and women's sport of the time. Principally, some lesbian athletes experienced high degrees of overt homophobic hostility. Anderson has collectively interviewed (2002, 2005, 2011a, 2011c) nearly 100 openly gay male athletes, having yet to evidence a single act of overt hostility or symbolic violence. Yet in this study of just 12 lesbian athletes, this type of hostility (although limited) was present.

This is surprising, particularly because both at the time of the research (2002) and today, there are/were many more openly lesbian athletes than openly gay male athletes in college sports. Evidencing this statement, of the 12 women studied in this article, five came out in part because there was already another lesbian or two already out on their teams. Four of the athletes suggest that their outing influenced a teammate to also come out. Thus, only three of the athletes found themselves as the lone lesbian on their team. This finding stands in stark contrast to Anderson's work on male teams, in which less than 5% had other openly gay male athletes on their teams. Most of the men Anderson interviewed did not even know of other openly gay male athletes at their school/college. This therefore suggests that there is a stronger culture of being open about homosexuality in women's sport, and thus there might also therefore be stronger heterosexual resistance toward it. It is for this reason that we argue homophobia might be more accentuated in women's sports than it is in men's.

Although further empirical evidence would be required to make this claim, when one refers to the recent work of Cunningham et al. (2013), Fink et al. (2012), Griffin (2012) and Melton and Cunningham (2012), it appears that hostility toward sexual minorities in women's sport teams may be worse than it is with men's sport. In other words, when a male athlete comes out to his soccer teammates it does not cast homosexual suspicion onto the heterosexuality of his other teammates: this is partially because openly gay men in competitive team sports are rare, and also because men playing sport is consistent with heterosexual notions of masculinity. However, when a female athlete comes out in team sport, cultural suspicion of homosexuality is likely cast onto other female players because there are both more lesbian players in sport, and (importantly) athleticism has been heavily culturally associated with homosexuality for women, whereas it is associated with heterosexuality for men. This cultural condition might make heterosexual women more protective of their socially perceived sexual orientations in sport than men, perhaps making women's sport more homophobic. It is for this reason—the fear of being socially perceived as lesbian—that the apologetic is found within women's sport. We are currently conducting research on openly lesbian athletes in 2013, examining the intersection of homophobia and women's sport.

Finally, while this article addresses a historical gap in the literature on the experience of lesbians in sport, it also leaves us with further questions. Anderson (2011c) has recently updated his research on the experiences of openly gay male athletes, showing that gay male athletes no longer show aspects of reverse relative deprivation as they participate in increasingly open and inclusive sporting environments. He also shows an abatement of the *don't ask, don't tell* culture (2011a), and that athletes of lesser capability are increasingly coming out. Most important perhaps, Anderson's (2011a, 2011c) research shows that the outing of a gay male teammate is perceived as raising a team's social cohesion. These findings now need to be examined for openly lesbian women in competitive team sports, something we are also undertaking.

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