

The Experience of Coming Out as a Gay Male Athlete

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There has been limited research on gay male athletes' experience of coming out within sport. In order to obtain further insight into this experience, the current study involved phenomenological interviewing of six gay male athletes to understand the experience of coming out within sport. This approach focused on the descriptions and meanings that participants provided in relation to their experience (Nesti, 2004). A total of six in-depth phenomenological interviews with gay male athletes representing a variety of sports (i.e., cross country, football, hockey, lacrosse, swimming, and track) were conducted. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 24 ($M = 21.33$, $SD = 2.25$). Analysis of the transcripts revealed a total of 220 meaning units that were further grouped into sub-themes and major themes. This led to the development of a final thematic structure revealing five major elements that characterized these athletes' experience of coming out in sport: The Role of Masculinity, Fear of Rejection, The Mask, The Conversation, and The Aftermath. The findings can be used to help closeted athletes in sport understand the experience of coming out and provide a number of suggestions for others involved in the process.

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Homosexuality, along with homophobia, homonegativism, and heterosexism are key areas of concern that currently control behaviors and norms within sports (Elfman, 2007). Homophobia is a prejudice, fear, aversion, or discrimination toward homosexuals (Sue & Sue, 2003). Homonegativism deals with negative intellectual, moral, or emotional actions and attitudes toward homosexuals (Ford, 2006), while, heterosexism deals with the idea of superiority of heterosexuals over homosexuals (Sue & Sue, 2003).

Heterosexism plays a vital role in the way gay athletes are portrayed. Numerous research studies have shown that there is a negative connotation attached to being a gay athlete (see Barber & Krane, 2007; Blum, 1994; Elfman, 2007; Griffin, 1999; Jellison, McConnell, & Gabriel, 2003; Kimball, 1995; Knight & Giuliano, 2003; Krane & Barber, 2005; Muska, 2001; Short, 2007; Wolf-Wendel, Toma, & Morpew, 2001). Therefore, heterosexual athletes learn to avoid placing themselves in positions where their sexuality can be questioned, and gay athletes learn to hide their sexuality by not giving verbal or nonverbal cues as an indication of their sexuality with the hopes of keeping peace and acceptance on the team (Griffin, 1999).

Sport has become a place where heterosexuality is favored over homosexuality; where heterosexual masculinity is acceptable, and other forms of sexuality are not (Anderson, 2011). Even though there are more openly gay athletes in sport today, the nature of sports is still surrounded by homophobia (Anderson, 2011). For example, the use of derogatory and homonegative slurs are commonplace among coaches and athletes (Campbell et al., 2011; Curry, 1991; McCormack & Anderson, 2010).

Within the world of sport, research has shown that the prejudiced attitudes of society toward gay males are exacerbated (Campbell et al., 2011; Martens & Mobley, 2005). In team sports gay athletes supposedly disrupt the boundary of masculinity (Alley & Hicks, 2005; Bird & Williams, 1980; Harrison & Lynch, 2005; Muska, 2001). For example, when a gay male athlete joins a team he is said to be disrupting the homogeneity that is in place (Griffin, 1999; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2001). Thus, the traditional masculinity associated with sport is tarnished, and the sense of team may be disrupted. One recent study, which appears to contradict this notion of homophobia in sport, found that young (16-18 years of age) soccer players in the UK were unconcerned about sharing and changing in a locker room with gay players (Magrath, Anderson, & Roberts, 2013). Furthermore, it has been suggested there has been an overall decline in homophobia amongst teenage boys in recent years (Anderson, Magrath, & Bullington, 2016; McCormack, 2012) and that the coming out experience for young gay and bisexual males can be extremely positive (Anderson & McCormack, 2016; McCormack, Anderson, & Adams, 2014).

While the literature above appears to point to an encouraging trend of decreasing homophobia, sport is still typically seen as a definite endeavor of traditional masculinity (Andersen, 2005; Barret, 1993; Griffin, 1993; Kopay & Young, 2001). According to Griffin (1998) "sport for men serves several functions in maintaining stereotypical gender roles, including the reinforcement of traditional conceptions of masculinity and the promotion of heterosexuality" (p. 251). As boys grow up in sport they are taught to suppress femininity and characteristics that are seen as feminine, such as compassion or tenderness. Additionally, those who exhibit these characteristics can be patronized and labeled with derogatory names (Andersen, 2005). Due to this criticism, it can be difficult for gay male athletes to divulge that information to teammates and coaches for fear of ridicule (Anderson, 2005; Pronger, 1990; Rankin, 1997). Some athletes are still unsure about the backlash they could receive if they were to come out as an athlete playing within sport (Andersen, 2005; Pronger, 1990; Rotella & Murray, 1991). Therefore, it is hardly surprising that there remains a lack of research on the experiences of those gay male athletes who have come out in sport.

In recent years, researchers within sport have called for research that 'gives a voice' to marginalized groups (Fisher, Butryn & Roper, 2005; Ryba, 2005; Ryba & Kashope-Wright, 2005; Schinke et al., 2006). It could be argued that gay athletes fall in this marginalized group because of the homophobia, homonegativism, and heterosexism prevalent within sport. The world of sport does not allow room for a gay man, and when one decides to enter the world of sport then he ultimately takes on the role of the challenger of the concept of masculinity, which can hinder the team dynamic of the so called "in-group" (Guerra, 2005). In order to provide a voice for this marginalized group more in-depth research is needed to investigate their experiences (Anderson et al., 2016).

Research has often reported that the biggest concern among gay male athletes is the fear of being "outed"; they fear that their teammates and coaches will discover their sexual identity (Andersen, 2005). These athletes fear physical retribution if their true identity were to be discovered; therefore, they try to hide it (Andersen, 2005; Rotella & Murray, 1991). However, Anderson et al. (2016) recently noted that research on gay and lesbian athletes must be kept up-to-date given that societal views on sexuality may have seen a significant change since the millennium. Thus, there is a clear need for in-depth research that provides information to closeted gay male athletes about the coming out experience of other gay male athletes.

A few studies have looked at the experience of coming out in sport among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender athletes (Eng, 2008; Gough, 2007; Griffin, 1998; Pronger, 1990). Eng (2008) performed qualitative interviews with 18 lesbian, gay, and bisexual Norwegian athletes. The male informants in this study confirmed that homophobia and homon-

egativism is a definite element in the masculinity of sport; in addition, "the informants did stress the limitations of how sexuality, sex/gender, and their manifestations within their chosen sport traditionally are understood" (Eng, 2008, p. 115). The informants also acted out through homosexual and heterosexual desires by obeying the heteronormativity laws and challenging them at the same time (Eng, 2008).

Gough (2007) reported that gay athletes faced difficulty in accepting themselves and in telling others about their sexuality. The results from that study also showed how personal suffering and isolation were explored through four interlocking themes of: a) sport as a distraction from sexuality, b) invisibility and isolation within sport, c) coming out to the team: difficult but rewarding, and d) becoming politicized: challenging heterosexism within sport (Gough, 2007). Additionally, Pronger (1990) reported that a homosexual athlete feared that if he were to come out that it would definitely end his career. Specifically, Dale, a closeted football player feared coming out due to the homophobia within his football team (Pronger, 1990). Whereas, Vargo, (1998) suggests that the disclosure piece of coming out gives a sense of relief among those who decide to come out and disclose that they are gay to others.

One research approach with the potential to uncover the richness and complexity of the coming out process is existential phenomenological interviewing. Existentialism refers to a philosophy of human existence (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997), whereas phenomenology relates to an examination of meaningful experiences in the form of an interview, better described as conversation between the researcher and the participant who is noted as the expert on the particular phenomenon (Dale, 1996). Existentialism guides the phenomenological methodology toward a concentration on the lived experience of individuals as opposed to their general knowledge (Solomon, 1972). Given that little research to date has examined the rich and nuanced experiences of gay male athletes coming out in sport it was deemed that existential phenomenology was an appropriate methodology to uncover these athletes' lived experience. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to investigate how gay male athletes experienced coming out during participation within sport.

Methods

Participants

The final sample of participants consisted of six gay male athletes at varying levels of experience; four participants were NCAA Division I student-athletes, one competed at the NCAA Division III level and one participant came out during high school. Each athlete competed in one sport each (i.e., cross-country, football, ice hockey, lacrosse, swimming, and track). The participants ranged in age from 19 to 24 ($M = 21.33$, $SD = 2.25$). The athletes

involved were all male athletes who experienced coming out while still participating in their respective sport. For this reason, criterion sampling was used to select participants. The final number of participants was ultimately determined by data saturation, which occurred when information obtained in interviews became redundant (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). No participants were excluded in this study; a total of six athletes contacted the researcher and all met inclusion criteria to participate.

Procedures

The procedures used in this study were based on Pollio et al.'s (1997) and Thomas and Pollio's (2002) recommendations for conducting existential phenomenological research. They included the following steps: *Exploring Researcher Bias*, *Data Collection*, *Data Analysis*, and *Developing/Confirming Thematic Structure*.

Exploring Researcher Bias. For this study, the primary author, who conducted all the interviews participated in a phenomenological bracketing interview to bring awareness to his perceptions and biases related to gay male athletes' experiences of coming out. The bracketing revealed that the primary author had gone through the experience of coming out to friends. Although it was not in a sport context, the researcher mentioned experiencing fear of coming out. In addition, the primary author revealed he felt a high level of stress prior to coming out as he attempted to hide his sexuality from his friends and family. The results from the bracketing process were referred to prior to each interview and continuously during the analysis process in an attempt to avoid presuppositions and biases affecting the validity of the process (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Accordingly, the use of field notes was also used before and after conducting interviews. These field notes described the physical location (when available) of the interview, any unusual events that occurred, any verbal and non-verbal communication, the researcher's reactions, and any other behaviors of the participants not caught on the audio file (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). These two processes of bracketing and field notes help ensure researchers are "more attuned to their presuppositions about the nature and meaning of the present phenomenon and thereby sensitize them to any potential demands they may impose on their participants either during the interview or in its subsequent interpretation" (Pollio et al., 1997). Overall, the primary researchers' predispositions and biases did not interfere with the current study while interacting with the participants.

Data Collection. Prior to data collection, the researcher received approval from Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects that the research was in line with IRB guidelines. Once the participant agreed to be interviewed, a convenient time was agreed upon for data collection. Before the start of the interview, participants were required to complete a consent form which was sent and returned via email. Due to

large geographical distances between the researcher and participants all interviews were conducted via Skype. The primary researcher began the interview with the following open-ended question: "When you think of your experiences of coming out as a gay male athlete in your sport, what stands out for you?" Other open-ended follow up questions were asked to gain an in-depth understanding of coming out as a gay male athlete in sport and to clear up any ambiguities (Dale, 1996). The opening question focused attention on gathering data that led to a textual and structural description of the participants' experiences, and ultimately provided an understanding of the common experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013). As stated by Thomas and Pollio (2002) the participant was the one explaining the experience, and only the use of follow-up questions were asked based off what was said to gain clarification to previous answers. The interview process in the phenomenological approach allowed the participant to be the expert as opposed to the researcher, which is the case in other standardized modes of inquiry (Dale, 1996). Lastly, at the end of the interview process, the researcher asked the participant if they had anything to add to their experience.

Upon completion of the interview, the primary author transcribed all audio files verbatim. Participants were then provided a copy of their transcription and were asked to read back over the transcriptions to make sure they were accurate depictions of what they said during the interview process (Sparkes, 1998). This process gave them an opportunity to add, remove, or make changes to the data adding validity to the research. The participants only made minor edits such as the spelling of place names. In order to ensure the confidentiality, a pseudonym was used for each participant, and any identifiable details were removed from the transcripts. Interviews ranged in length from approximately 20 to 60 minutes ($M = 41.67$ min, $SD = 13.57$). After the research had concluded, all athletes were sent a copy of the final manuscript for them to read and keep.

Data Analysis. The de-identified transcriptions of the interviews were read several times by the researchers individually and then again in an interpretative research group made up of faculty members with qualitative experience and graduate students taking an advanced qualitative research class. Each group member brought with them a diverse perspective from their respective forms of disciplinary training, gender role socialization, and cultural heritage (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). The same group had earlier read and interpreted the researcher's bracketing interview and was, therefore, able to highlight any assumptions or biases that appeared during the interviews with participants. All members of the interpretive research group signed a third party confidentiality form prior to involvement. The group thoroughly examined each transcript to reveal themes within the interviews that stood out as being significant (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). The primary researcher worked with the group in order to develop a general thematic structure for the interview data. During each of these ses-

sions, the transcripts were read aloud with numerous pauses for discussions of the possible meaning units and themes that seemed to emerge. Ultimately, "the use of an interpretative research group is important for maintaining the rigor of phenomenological research methods" (Thomas & Pollio, 202, p. 35).

Developing/Confirming Thematic Structure. While reading over the transcripts, key statements or keywords were circled, and a list of significant meaning units was developed. These meaning units described how the athlete experienced the topic of coming out. A meaning unit is "a statement made by an individual which is self-defining and self-delimitating in the expression of a single, recognizable aspect of the individual's experience" (Stones, 1988, p. 153). Next, these meaning units were grouped together into larger, similar meaning units to form subthemes. Then the development of these subthemes placed together formed major themes. Both a textural description that tells what happened during the phenomenon and a structural description that tells how the athlete experienced the phenomenon was described.

In summary, the analysis utilized the development of a thematic structure that included meaning units taken from the transcript (that included verbatim examples) and connected those meaning units to develop sub-themes and finally major themes. The final part of the data analysis was to receive feedback from the participants over the thematic structure and to critique whether the analysis reflected their personal experiences (Thomas & Pollic, 2002). This helped to validate the findings, and whether or not it represented the personal experience, they went through (Dale, 1996; Nesti, 2004). In total, five of the six participants responded and confirmed their transcripts and that the thematic structure accurately portrayed their experience. The sixth participant never returned the correspondence to indicate receipt of the manuscript and the researcher was not aware of the reasoning behind the non-confirmation from the participant. Lastly, the use of the participants' language to describe the dialogue and themes was beneficial in ensuring that the study performed was valid.

Results

Thematic Structure

Qualitative analysis of the transcripts revealed a total of 220 meaning units, which were further grouped into sub-themes and general themes. The final thematic structure revealed five major themes that characterized these athletes' experiences of coming out: *The Role of Masculinity*, *Fear of Rejection*, *The Mask*, *The Conversation*, and *The Aftermath*.

It is important to note that although the themes are further discussed separately in the following sections, their interconnectedness must be acknowledged to aid in full compre-

hension. A detailed display of the thematic structure including the primary themes and the components incorporated are shown in Table 1. Supplementary to the general themes and sub-themes delineated, sample quotes are provided to demonstrate how the themes were generated from the participants' statements. Pseudonyms are provided after each quote to indicate which participant made that statement, in addition to the identification of the specific sport the participant has had experience with.

Table 1

Major and Sub-Themes of Participants' Experiences of Coming Out in Sport and Representative Meaning Units

Major Themes	Sub-Themes	Representative Meaning Unit
The Role of Masculinity	Conformity	Prejudice, masculinity, stereotyping
	Hatred	Slurs, attack, homophobia
	Exclusion	Rejection, refuge
Fear of Rejection	Uncertainty	Scared, doubt, fear
	Anxiety	Nervous, worry, stress, anger
The Mask	Charade	Act, pretend, tangled web
	Secrets	Lying, hiding, mask, paranoia
	Depression	Suicide, baggage
The Conversation	Time & Place	One-on-one, took pressure off, control, accident, alcohol
The Aftermath	Support	Acceptance, positive, difficult, courage, awkwardness
	Respect	Apologize, humor/joke
	Relief	Happiness, liberating

The Role of Masculinity

The Role of Masculinity emerged as the backdrop that was fundamental to these athletes' experience of coming out in sport. *The Role of Masculinity* encompassed the slurs and prejudice placed upon the participants as they decide to come out. Not only that, but the stereotyping of what an athlete is and how masculinity is defined affects these athletes' experiences in a predominantly heterosexist world of sport. This theme was further broken down into sub-themes: *Conformity*, *Hatred*, and *Exclusion*.

Conformity. The vast majority of the athletes experienced stereotyping related to being more masculine, and it planted seeds of doubt in their minds about whether they could be gay and be capable of performing at a high level. James, a lacrosse player, mentioned, "I think with sports... you are supposed to be manly and then how can you be manly if you like guys. I guess because it's kind of the connotation that gay guys are feminine." Additionally, he said, "people might question your masculinity if you tell them you are gay and that's the last thing you want to do in sport because you want to be like seen as very masculine" (James, Lacrosse). For Benjamin, a track athlete, conformed to his athletic role by working as hard as possible "I was one of the harder workers on the team I think probably because I'm trying to assert my masculinity and whatever."

Hatred. Several participants indicated that because of their participation in sports they would hear homophobic slurs and verbal hatred aimed toward gay people, which affected their decision to want to come out. For example, one of the athletes talked about experiencing others throwing gay slurs around while playing, "there's a lot of slurs thrown around. A lot of, 'that's gay, you're gay, faggot, cock sucker' you know. That's thrown around quite a bit and it hurts" (Brett, Hockey). James expressed "lacrosse as a sport as a whole was a little more homophobic so that was why I was so nervous of coming out in the sporting world of lacrosse." James, went on to explain

Even though you know they are joking; sometimes you think they are not joking and so like you think they actually hate gay people so then, do you want to come out to them? You think that they might hate you because they say all those hateful things. I can remember when everybody's said something hateful about gay people so like I know it might not be directed at me but in a sense I feel like it was directed at my sexuality and proving a point even more that it wasn't right to be gay so it made it more difficult for me to accept it and come out to them in the end.

However, not only did these individuals face verbal attacks, but also sometimes they faced physical attacks.

Toward the end of the year, I made Varsity for the team, and I was walking in the course for a race that I was expected to win and a teammate of mine took a rock,

about the size of a softball and threw it at the back of my head. Then the rest of my team was just a little bit behind him and he was at the front of the pack and so my teammates that were around him kind of said, "what the hell were you doing, why, what was that?" And he said, "what's the big deal? It's just that gay pussy fag kid" (George, Cross-Country).

Although some of the participants did not experience this hatred directed toward them or directed toward their sexuality, it seemed to be a factor in their fear of rejection and fear of being excluded.

Exclusion. The participants sometimes felt like outsiders on their own teams, which caused them to feel excluded from various team members and activities. One participant responded to a follow-up question by saying:

The big thing for me was that it made feel like I wasn't fully a part of the team. I felt like I was just someone who was coming in and running with the team... I knew that just the way people were going to treat me would change and it did end up happening a little bit (George, Cross-Country).

Even in conversation things changed with George and his teammates, "They would talk about various different things... but once I came out a lot of those conversations kind of stopped... I missed them because it made me feel like another part of the team."

Similarly, Benjamin a track athlete, discussed how before coming out he used to act like he was interested in talking about girls, but since coming out he didn't have to pretend anymore and that has caused him to feel excluded because now his teammates don't have that much in common with him.

I think that's part of what made the separation a little more because now instead of them trying to engage me and have conversation about something that I'm completely not interested in [women]... I'm just going to practice and that's all we talk about, at all.

Fear of Rejection

Fear of Rejection emerged as one of the major themes of gay male athletes' experiences of coming out in sport. This theme encompassed the athletes' descriptions of the emotions they experienced during the coming out process and included two sub-themes: *Uncertainty* and *Anxiety*.

Uncertainty. Several participants expressed having felt uncertainty throughout their experience of coming out in sport. Uncertainty pertains to that unknown feeling of what may happen if one comes out as gay, of what others may think if they found out one is gay, or doubt about not being accepted once one decides to come out. As stated by Max, a football

player, "I mean I think, I think that's an issue that all gay men have before they come out. Just that twinge of uncertainty they have about whether or not they are going to be accepted." There was that uncertainty that coming out would affect others and they did not want that to occur. For example, Brett, a hockey player said:

I was scared that if I came out it's going to be a distraction to the team and I didn't want my sexuality to be a distraction to the on-ice play as silly as it sounds. I don't know, I didn't want it to be a focus for them, me being gay because it's, I don't know, I was just nervous to do it that way.

The previous quote shows how the athletes' uncertainty of what other may think lead to them questioning how and when to come out causing a sense of anxiety related to that fear and uncertainty.

Anxiety. Trying to decide how and when to come out created a lot of anxiety among the participants. Considering that the gay male participants are athletes playing in a domain that is usually dominated by masculinity, it makes sense as to why some of them encountered anxiety associated with their decision. Max stated, "I mean, I was worried about it. I wasn't, you know, really sure if football was ready for this or if I would be accepted, so it was definitely something that concerned me." For Brett, he recognized how closed-minded some of his teammates (Hockey) were, "I was a little worried because being 18 and 19 they are not as open to things... they are pretty closed-minded and sheltered." However, not all were concerned about the sporting world. For one participant, the anxiety arose in relation to what his family would think:

You've been hiding something from them [family] for however long you've been alive. It is a very nerve-racking experience because it's like that feeling of rejection again because you've looked at them your whole life and you sometimes hear these stories of people coming out to their parents and their parents not accepting them and kicking you out of the household. So like in your mind you're like I really hope that doesn't happen to me. So then you kind of freak out because they are the people that mean most to you in your life and you want to have them in your life forever (James, Lacrosse).

In summary, the major theme of *Fear of Rejection* encompassed the negative emotions for these participants. Based on the comments of these athletes, the emotional transformation of the experience of coming out in sport was paralleled by the masking of their true self that the athletes had to experience before they were ready to reveal their sexuality to others.

The Mask

According to the participants' descriptions, this theme was embedded in the masking of one's true identity and the accompanying obstacles that are hiding their sexuality caused. This major theme revealed three sub-themes: *Charade*, *Secrets*, and *Depression*.

Charade. In order to hide their sexuality from the outside world, it was necessary for the participants to put on an act, to pretend to be straight and be someone they were not according to the athletes' descriptions. One athlete was quoted saying, "in the sense it was like a huge acting job to convince your friends that you're something you're not" (James, Lacrosse). Correspondingly, Benjamin a track athlete stated, "It was, just always thinking about how I should act, how I should walk, how I should talk, and things I should bring up... it just was all the time." For James who played lacrosse, he had to pretend and act out in the public eye as if he liked girls. He concluded:

I had to pretend to like girls, like, make out with girls in public and then take them back to my room and pretend to have sex with them and in reality they would want to have sex and I would make up some excuse to why I couldn't just because I didn't want to in the end. Just the constant charade of just trying to show people you're not gay and you're straight can be very exhausting. And then, make you even unhappier when you can't be yourself and you have to fake being someone else.

The athletes referred to the battle of trying to conceal who they were, which affected not only themselves emotionally and physically, but it affected other aspects of their life. The participants' charade would further be exemplified by the secrets that they would have to fulfill on an everyday basis.

Secrets. In having to mask their sexuality brought about a tangled web of lies filled with deceit and paranoia. All of the participants found it hard to be honest with others around them, including their teammates. "It was stressful in the sense that I couldn't be honest with them...the hockey team was the slowest in my coming out process" (Brett, Hockey). Benjamin expressed his disparity in having always to keep track of his lies and not explaining certain parts of his gay lifestyle:

Because the gay lifestyle did take up a certain part of my life there were certain parts of my weekend that I wouldn't tell them [teammates]. "Like, hey, what did you do this weekend?" "Oh, I went to the gay club." Clearly, I couldn't say that because I didn't want them to know I was gay... it was like a tangled web, yeah, it was definitely a tangled web. So it was like, you always try, you always have a story in your head of like what's going on and it's tough to keep track of (Track).

It was imperative that the participants put on this "mask" and hide their true self. For James, he talked about, "You have to make sure you put on this mask in public so people see you for this nice straight guy. Whereas you can't let them find out what's truly hiding inside you." The participants explained how carrying these lies and secrets with them every day took a toll on them mentally.

Depression. This sub-theme dealt with how some of the participants spiraled into a depressive state due to the tangled web of lies. For Brett, a hockey player, he had trouble with accepting the fact that he was gay that lead to depression and unhappiness. He stated:

I was still depressed and I was still self-hating. I still didn't want to be gay even though I knew and accepted it at that point before I came out. I didn't, I still didn't want to be gay at all. I was like nope, nope I know I'm gay but I don't want to be. I was still at that point where I was very unhappy with being gay.

Other participants described that feeling of indecision of coming out, "There's that little feeling of depression or like do I really want to put myself through this" (James, Lacrosse). Correspondingly, Ethan, a swimmer stated, "I wanted to let anything that was weighing me down go... I was struggling with that [the decision to come out]... The baggage I wanted to get rid of and get back to being a normal person feeling happy and healthy." The athletes' responses indicate how that decision of coming outweighed heavy on them as "baggage" that lured them down a path of self-hate and depression. "It pretty much just spun me into a deeper and deeper and deeper depression" (Brett, Hockey). As well as depression, one participant thought of suicide:

You always hear that a couple kids might commit suicide because they'd rather die than tell their religious parents something. It's a very awful feeling just like, would this be better than putting yourself through this possible rejection of everybody that you love? So like did it cross my mind that I would want to maybe just end it and not have to do anything, yeah, but in the end I think that suicide for me personally is kind of coping out like the selfish thing to do because in the end you'll be hurting the people that loved you even worse than if you told them you're gay, to be honest, that's what I think (James, Lacrosse).

The link between having to hide and mask one's identity to depression seems evident based on the participants.

The Conversation

The fourth dimension of the gay male athletes' experience in coming out was *The Conversation*, which deals with the way these athletes decided to come out. This major theme was comprised of one sub-theme: *Time & Place*.

Time & Place. This sub-theme encompasses with the importance of the timing of the coming out among the participants. It is important to note that within this theme and sub-theme, the participants seemed to have minimal discussion directly linked to that actual moment when they told someone that they were gay. Participants were more concerned about the masking of their self before, along with the relief and liberation after they told that first

person. With this sub-theme, it involved the decision process of coming out and how the participants planned on coming out. "The only reason why I did come out was because it was actually, it was by accident" (Benjamin, Track). Benjamin was so angry and fed-up that he accidentally told everyone how they don't understand what it's like to be gay and be around others who ridicule gay people. Many of the athletes mentioned how when they decided to come out they wanted to be in control of how it happened. As Ethan says:

I wanted to tell people and do it quietly, I didn't want to be lavish. So... a couple weeks later I told my other roommate and a couple of weeks after that I told some more people. It kind of spread very slowly. I didn't want to make a big deal but at the same time I just wanted to control the message (Swimming).

In the same way, Brett explains how it was best that he controlled how it was told to others: I think it was definitely easier for myself that way I had more control of the reaction I think and even easier for the people I told because they weren't influenced by others around them. You know? It wasn't like; wow did you hear what he just said? And then like having little side discussions with each other about it instead of just processing it themselves (Hockey).

Although some of the coming out experiences seemed to be planned out, there were others that came out by accident with the help of alcohol. The experience of coming out was difficult for some of the participants, but it was aided by means of "liquid courage." Benjamin said, "It [alcohol] did yeah it did [help]. It sucks that's what it was. I wish it could have been something where, 'oh I came to the nerve to say what I wanted to say'" (Track). Even though some of the participants used alcohol as a means to help them that was not the case for all of them. Additionally, the athletes' experiences of coming out in sport was influenced based on how the information was disseminated in who knew about their sexuality.

In summation, *The Conversation* appeared to have a significant effect on the overall experience yet participants quickly moved on to discuss how people reacted to the news as opposed to the actual details of the conversations.

The Aftermath

The final major theme that came about representing gay male athlete experience of coming out in sport was *The Aftermath*. This theme involved the positive experience of revealing your sexuality and the respect placed upon these individuals by teammates, friends, and family. This major theme included three sub-themes: *Support, Respect, & Relief*.

Support. The athletes emphasized the importance of gaining that acceptance and related it directly to how it allowed for a positive coming out experience. George explained how "that feeling of slowly feeling a little bit more accepted was very powerful for me"

(Cross-Country). For Max, he was pleasantly surprised by the support he received:

I was really surprised by the overwhelming positive reaction that I received. I mean I thought I was pretty sure that most guys would be okay with it but you know I still thought that you know there might be some reservations about that but I was overwhelmed by the support that I got... I mean I was really surprised that guys just really didn't care at this point and so that was great for me to know that I have their support (Football).

Other participants described the acceptance they were given, "I think what stands out the most is how accepting, um understanding accepting they [teammates] were" (Ethan, Swimming). Related to that, Benjamin a track athlete stated, "After I came out it was more like I had a lot of support from my teammates. You know, and they were like... I could be anybody who I wanted to be." It was important that the participants had the support from team members and to feel like the guys would have their back as they did before coming out. In addition, some of the participants acknowledged the support systems they had built up after they decided to come out to their teammates. As one male put it:

I had numerous support systems by the time that I got to the Lacrosse team coming out wise... So by then I had my fraternity for support, I had my family, my parents and then on our campus we have for LGBT like communities/groups that I could go for support and also I was seeing a therapist at the time who she helped me talk through the process and everything. So I had countless support systems, which helped me through the process and I think without them it would've been much harder than to not have them (James, Lacrosse).

For some of the participants the aftermath was filled with awkwardness, and it was a time of uncertainty. James expressed:

So when I came out to my Lacrosse team it was kind of like a two-way deal. Like they didn't really know how to handle having an openly gay player in like I didn't really know how to like be openly gay in front of my team so those kind of couple weeks of how do we like deal with this and what really got us past that like unsure awkwardness. I just didn't know how to like interact with the guys because I didn't know how to deal with them and they didn't know how to deal with me. So I just think it took that period of like how are we going to do this relationship further and how are we going to keep things the same or something going to change (Lacrosse).

Overall, it seemed that as the majority of these athletes felt the support they wanted and became accepted among teammates.

Respect. In order to gain that acceptance and for the individuals to feel valued, teammates provided the athletes with apologies and acknowledgment that they were still "one of the guys" even though they came out as being gay. In response to a follow-up question, Max

noted, "well the first teammate I told was really surprised but he pretty much just told me that you know I'm still one of the brothers" (Football). Not only that but also one participant described how one of his friends made him feel included with the team:

Like one of them in particular, he treats like me like another one of the guys, which is awesome. I don't have to feel like I am separate from the rest of the running pack. I can feel like someone who's just another person on the team (George, Cross-Country).

In line with this statement:

I feel like people don't see me as the gay lacrosse player, but they see me as... a person. They see my personality first and for who I am and then they describe me as gay or as a lacrosse player. So, in that sense I know that people are loving me for who I really am and not just because of what I am (James, Lacrosse).

Not only was there overt respect given to these gay male athletes, but genuine acceptance was felt through apologies of those who may have said anything negative before they decided to come out. George explained it by saying that:

I had a couple of them actually like they apologized... I had one kid, the most memorable was one kid who never really before had spoken to me, but he sent me message and he was like, and it said, "I know we haven't really talked a lot, even though we're on the same team. But, I wanted to apologize if you ever, if I ever said a gay joke or something like that, that's offended you and I really, apologize for doing it. I never really realized like how normal someone can be and be gay at the same time and like, you kind of proved me wrong in that regard. So, I want to apologize for that" (Cross-Country).

Once the participants felt like they had that support and respect of others around them, that allowed for feelings of liberation, and they could now finally be who they really were, their true self.

Relief. All of the participants mentioned a sense of relief after coming out. "It was very liberating I guess. Comforting to know like ah the [relief], the hard part is over" (Ethan, Swimming). One participant delved into how much effort it had been prior to coming out.

Probably the biggest relief in my life... I never realized how much I thought about it every day of my life since I was ten years old until the day I came out like how much time and energy it actually took to actively think about it and actively not do things that would make me appear gay. It was, I feel like I gained a tremendous amount of energy in my everyday life by coming out. I was finally like, hmmm, guess it was like... kind of like freeing. You finally felt free to be yourself for the first time ever (Brett, Hockey).

Many of the participants indicated the instant relief and gratification of telling someone their secret they had been holding in. "It was a huge sense of relief...I was excited to finally make this jump and let everybody know the real me...It's just taken a load off" (Max, Football). In addition, George, a cross-country athlete implied that "coming out, that extra weight was taken off. I felt like I could go out there and they knew everything about me and they knew who I was." However, it is important to note that some of the participants in this study mentioned how this process of coming out caused performance decrements. In regards to this, each athlete is different and should be aware of the possible positive (i.e., relief) and negative ramifications (i.e., performance decrements) of coming out. In conclusion, the theme of *The Aftermath* encompassed the support, respect, and sense of relief these athletes felt. For the participants the coming out experience was extremely positive despite some moments of initial awkwardness.

Discussion

The results of the in-depth phenomenological interviews with six gay male athlete participants revealed five major themes that characterize these athletes' experiences of coming out in sport: *The Role of Masculinity*, *Fear of Rejection*, *The Mask*, *The Aftermath*, and *The Conversation*. One significant finding that emerged from this study was how all the major themes were linked together. At the start of an athlete's experience in the process of coming out is *The Role of Masculinity* that involves the pressures of society that places masculinity at the forefront of sporting situations. Furthermore, gays slurs and homophobic comments made these gay athletes feel concerned about telling their teammates and loved ones about their sexuality. Next was the *Fear of Rejection* that involved the anxiety and stress associated with the uncertainty of what other may think about them being gay and it is brought about in part because of the pressure to conform. As the process of coming out progresses, the participants talked about *The Mask*. This element involves the lies and masking of their true self that these gay male athletes have to deal with in order to deceive others and act like they are straight. Next, *The Conversation* involved the actual process of when they decided to come out including the time and the place. Finally, the *The Aftermath* was the final aspect of the coming out process, and it is an important element because this involves the acceptance and how the attitude of those around the athlete changed once they come out. These five major themes progress from one into the other on a continuum describing the process associated with coming out in sport.

The present study revealed some new findings that are not discussed in prior research. Although previous investigations (see Andersen, 2005; Pronger 1990) looked at the sub-theme *Fear of Rejection* in the relation to the fear of not being accepted, the participants in

the current study referenced the concept of lying and hiding behind *The Mask* as a form of hiding their sexuality in hopes of trying to put up a facade and remain accepted by those around them. Consistent with previous research (Gough, 2007), the results of the present study revealed that the athletes knew that it was paramount to keep secrets and try to cover up their life off the field of play through invisibility and isolation at times. The athletes were clear that it was important that they had stories to tell and to make sure they were able to cover their tracks to hide the fact that they were gay due to the fact that they feared the retribution of what could happen if teammates knew, which are similar to the findings of Andersen (2005) and Rotella and Murray (1991). Additionally, this charade put on by the participants is as equally important to their mental health, which can affect feelings of acceptance of themselves and can plant seeds of doubt leading to depression and thoughts of suicide.

Another key finding in this study was the importance of homophobic language between teammates, *Hatred*, which was a sub-theme of *The Role of Masculinity*. The sub-theme of *Hatred* is related to the homonegative slurs and attacks that took place in their sports. Although previous research has shown that this language is commonplace among coaches and athletes (Campbell et al., 2011; Curry, 1991; McCormack & Anderson, 2010), there have been reports that there is a decline in homophobic slurs and comments by athletes and fans (Anderson, 2002, 2005, in press; Campbell et al., 2011; Kian & Anderson, 2009; Magrath, et al. 2013, Mehaffey, 2010). However, the findings of the current study revealed that these athletes were in fact faced with prejudice and were witnesses of homophobic slurs among teammates, which affected their decision to come out. Furthermore, the one unique finding is that the majority of the athletes' experienced a reversal in this homophobia once they did come out. Their teammates became accepting and some offered apologies for saying negative comments when they were in the closet.

A unique element that emerged in the present study was that exact moment when the athlete's told another individual that they were gay. Although the athlete's in the present study mentioned this moment of disclosure, it did not seem to be a prominent moment in the whole experience of coming out. Throughout the interviews, the athlete's nonchalantly explained that exact moment when they said, "I'm gay." It was almost like this was just a point in time that did not have as much meaning for them, or they did not place as much importance on it compared to how they feared telling others and coming out and that feeling of liberation once they did come out.

After the participants did come out, related to the final theme of *The Aftermath*, they had the sense of relief that people were more accepting of them than what they had previously anticipated. As mentioned the participants in this study felt the support from others around them that proved to be beneficial in their coming out experience. These findings are similar

to previous research which shows individuals generally feel supported once they decide to come out to family, friends, and teammates (Anderson & McCormack, 2016; Gough, 2007; McCormack, 2012; Vargo 1998).

The results of this study offer several practical implications for athletes, coaches, parents, and administrators involved in sport. Table 2 (see in appendices) is based on the findings of the present investigation and suggests possible strategies for the various people that affect the sport experience for gay male athletes in sport. Although it is unlikely that these recommendations will result in immediate changes, they may help to improve the quality of the experience for the gay male athletes.

The results of the study provide a foundation for future research on gay male athletes coming out in sport. Continued exploration of the experience of coming out in sport for gay males should be examined in greater detail by obtaining the perspectives of other gay male athletes, along with coaches, family members, friends, and LGBT athletes in sports. Also, some of the participants in this study mentioned how this process of coming out caused performance decrements. Due to the nature of this study and the sport context, it could be important to determine the relationship between coming out and how it can affect an athlete's performance. As such, it is important to be aware of the balance between the phenomenological benefits of "relief" in coming out in comparison with a potential decrease in quality of performance.

While the present findings offer additional insights into the coming out experience, they are limited. While saturation of data was achieved, there was a small sample size. However, there is also a limited number of openly gay male athletes. A further limitation is that the themes that emerged are only representative of the current participants and not necessarily those of all openly gay male athletes. As with all interview techniques, while participants were encouraged to speak freely about their experience, they may not have shared certain aspects of their experience for various reasons. Despite these limitations the results of the present study complement and extend upon previous research on the coming out experience in sport.

In particular, many aspects including people inside and outside the sport domain shaped the athlete participants' experiences in the study. The comments of the athletes suggest that the world of sport, which is regarded as being heterosexist and hyper-masculine is becoming more accepting of gay athletes (see Anderson et al. 2016). The athletes went through difficult times and had to accept their situation themselves before having the courage to tell others. However, once they came out they felt a huge sense of relief and all of them felt support and acceptance. The experience can be summed up in the five connected major themes that emerged that were: *Fear of Rejection, The Mask, The Role of Masculinity,*

The Aftermath, and *The Conversation*. In summation, the present investigation contributes to the literature by providing a descriptive exploration on the experience of a population that is not well represented in the sport domain.

Table 2

Practical Implications for Athletes, Coaches, Parents, and Administrators Involved in Sport

Practical Implications

Gay Athletes can:

- Understand the sacrifices and demands it takes to be a gay individual within sports.
- Be a model for coming out in the sport context to other closeted gay athletes.
- Be a spokesperson and facilitate workshops about their experience.
- Seek professional psychological support for issues of isolation, depression, and suicidal ideation.
- Develop a plan of coming out. For example, figure out how to control the message of coming out and in what context and setting they would like to have that conversation.

Straight Athletes can:

- Support teammates in coming out and being openly gay.
- Help develop an inclusive team environment
- Help guide positive interactions for all team members and members of the sport community.
- Support teammates on and off the field, no matter what their sexuality is.
- Avoid the use of all derogatory terms related to sexuality.

Coaches can:

- Provide support for gay athletes when they struggle or encounter negativity within sport.
- Be a model for inclusivity among the team.
- Treat each athlete equally.
- Refrain from using homonegative language on and off the field.

(Table 2 continued)

Mental Health and Sport Psychology Professionals can:

- Help provide athletes with coping strategies, mental preparation, and emotion control that will be beneficial for dealing with performance decrements, along with any adversity they may face.
- Understand the interplay of how *The Role of Masculinity* causes *Fear of Rejection* that leads to *The Mask* of true self. Also, how *The Conversation* and *The Aftermath* of providing support can affect the athletes *Masking* themselves.
- Help gay individuals plan the process of coming out (i.e., how to tell others).
- Provide gay individuals with support groups and ways to build self-esteem and reduce feelings of exclusion.

Administrators:

- Provide educational workshops on the use of appropriate language and on the effects of homonegativity.
- Market and promote the positive elements of sport and how it can be beneficial for all athletes.
- Welcome openly gay athletes into sport and provide guidance and support to those who may face adversity.
- Give out material about the inclusion of gay athletes.

Family, Friends, and Fans can:

- Refrain from using homonegative language.
 - Support athletes in their participation within sport in order to create a positive environment.
 - Provide empathy for gay athletes.
 - Embrace those who decide to come out.
 - Be an open ear for listening to gay athletes' concerns.
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