

## **Examining Gender Identity in College Sports: An Exploratory Study**

### **Introduction**

In a context where masculinity thrives, female athletes and athletes who identify as gender and/or sexual minorities may face unfair treatment, discrimination and harassment fueled by stereotypes and misconstrued assumptions (Greenspan et al., 2017; Heineken 2015; Kavoura & Kokkonen, 2020). For generations, heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity has dominated the world of sport which has led to varying degrees of experience for all athletes, specifically those who identify as gender and/or sexual minorities. This, in turn, has caused feelings of unappreciation, disrespect, and non-inclusivity amongst a broad spectrum of diverse athletes. Additionally, the intersectionality of these heteronormative and masculine ideals has resulted in the disruption of one's ability to define their own identity. Due to this, the present study will explore the following themes: hegemonic masculinity in sport, the gender and sexual minority experience in sport in general, and more specifically, the female and LGBTQ+ athlete experience in sport. Through this, and our overlying qualitative analysis, we hope to bring light to the struggling experiences that these athletes may face within our sport system.

### ***Hegemonic Masculinity in Sport***

Participation in American sport has largely been classified as "masculine" and is defined with characteristics that have long been associated with masculine traits such as aggressiveness, competitiveness and strength (Birell, 1983). Sports themselves have been structurally developed in a masculine schema in which the expectation has been set for all athletes to identify within the aggressive, competitive, and muscular construct. This, in itself, is defined as hegemonic masculinity, or the societal pattern in which stereotypical male traits are idealized as the cultural ideal which in turn idolizes the male gender in a specific aspect of society. This social construct creates a marginalization of people who fall outside of the realm of masculine expectation, specifically in sports. In order to improve on the fluidity of athleticism, one must reform the concept of sport through the mitigation of hyper-competitiveness, empowerment of varying body image and softening the dichotomous nature of winning/losing. It is imperative to remove negative connotations of masculinity that pertain to sexism, homophobia and racism in order to reduce the effects of hegemonic masculinity in sport (English, 2017).

While athleticism has been rooted in patriarchal identity dating back to Ancient Greece, as society has progressed, it has come to light that masculinity should not define one's ability to perform well within the sports context. For instance, in the past few decades, women have just recently been able to participate on gender-respectable teams and have long been seen as incapable of pristine athleticism. Through the development of women's soccer, basketball, lacrosse and

other sports teams, they now have the ability to perform in structured and professional environments much like their male counterparts. Furthermore, hegemonic masculinity has also impacted the experience of LGBTQ+ athletes where sexual/gender minorities have been seen as incapable of performing well within the sports context. For example, gay men have long been ostracized by men's sports due to the outdated idea that gay men are too feminine for the heterosexually dominated space of men's sports. This idea has been seen as homophobic given that one's sexual and gender identity is fluid amongst all people, even heterosexual men. These examples of the dynamic of hegemonic masculinity within sports culture adds to the definitive nature of the struggle that non-heterosexual, cisgender men may face.

### ***Gender and Sexual Minorities in Sport***

As previously stated, gender and sexual minorities have been historically subjected to institutional and structural disregard in the world of sport. As sports have progressed in varying degrees, the association with sexist, homophobic and transphobic constructs has persisted. In comparison to cisgender, heterosexual men, gender and sexual minority athletes have been discriminated against and treated unequally for centuries. Specifically, Western culture has been built off of structural inequalities that perpetuate the oppression of minorities (Herrick, 2018). Additionally, it has now been found that LGBTQ+ and female athletes have face related stress and discrimination amongst the context of sports due to homophobia, sexism, and exclusion which has resulted in mental and physical health complications like anxiety, depression, substance abuse and suicide (Herrick, 2018). Throughout the sports construct, gender and sexual minority athletes have been seen as incapable of the masculinized idea of athleticism. Additionally, due to the environment present within collegiate athletics, many gender and sexual minority athletes have been forced to hide their identity and face varying obstacles like oppressive laws, social conflict and ostracization.

### ***Female Athletes***

As above mentioned, sports are an arena in which hegemonic masculinity, heterosexual norms and masculine values dominate. In addition, athletics is a field that males have typically pursued in order to achieve this gender role identity and so-called 'masculine ideal'. For female athletes however, participation in sports has historically carried a negative stigma and many view female athletes as inherently "less feminine" putting one's personal identity at odds with society's expectations of gender roles (Czisma et al., 1988). Early socialization of gender norms leads to *gender bias*, stereotypes and misconceptions about roles, behaviors, abilities and experiences unique to men and women, which are not only largely inaccurate, but can also be damaging and extremely restrictive. This rigid adherence to the gender norm can also lead to *gender role conflict* among boys who struggle to uphold this "masculine ideal" and women, such as female athletes, who possess so-called

“masculine” attributes (APA Guidelines, 2018). Oftentimes, female athletes end up at odds with their athletic identity and their feminine identity, though the two are not, and should not be viewed as, mutually exclusive.

Historically, female athletes have been subject to unfair laws and inequality in various aspects of sport such as sport participation, careers, media coverage, pay etc. With the enactment of Title IX in 1972, there are indeed more female athletes than ever, but inequality is ever-present and the overall culture of sports, including but not limited to positions of power (Head Coach, Manager, Athletics’ Director, etc.) and sport consumers more specifically, continues to be male dominated (Steinfeldt et al., 2011). This reinforcing culture of hegemonic masculinity permeates throughout our society and is ultimately embedded in the gender norms with which we are raised.

Media is partially to blame as it portrays female athletes in a way that not only further perpetuates inaccurate representations of female athletes but marginalizes them by emphasizing attractiveness as opposed to athleticism. Many female athletes find the sexist media coverage to be offensive, pointing toward a need for media outlets to focus on athletic accomplishments rather than personal attributes (Knight & Giulano, 2001).

### **LGBTQ+ Athletes**

In a field that values masculine traits, it is no doubt that in addition to female athletes, athletes who identify as LGBTQ+ often experience additional unique challenges. Hemphill and Symons (2009, p. 398) describe heterosexism as ‘the widespread and often unquestioned assumption that heterosexuality is the natural and the only legitimate form of love, partnership, marriage, or sexual relationship’. Similarly, Sartore and Cunningham (2008) expose patterns of a compulsory heterosexual framework within society and more specifically within sport which encompasses the belief that heterosexuality is the norm and the only legitimate sexual orientation to which all other deviations from this norm are compared (Rich, 1980). The American Psychological Association published guidelines titled Psychological Practice with Boys and Men (2018) in which they posit that society pressures boys to adhere to this idea of *dominant masculinity* and are ostracized when they deviate from this norm.

Among sexual minorities who do not identify as heterosexual individuals, the act of “coming out” can be associated with fear and vulnerability. According to Klein et al. (2015), “coming out” is a social process as opposed to an internal one and can be considered a dynamic and transformational moment in the identity development of LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, etc.) individuals. In a society where “homosexuality” was classified as a mental disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) up until 1973, the struggle to belong and ‘be normal’ is still very much at the forefront of identity development among gender and sexual minorities (Drescher, 2015).

In sports, hegemonic masculinity thrives leaving little to no room for those who seemingly deviate from the norm. LGBTQ+ individuals face a myriad of unique challenges such as exclusion and discrimination. The concept of ‘athlete’ that has become known to society is one that rarely considers intersectionality. Herrick and Duncan (2018) found that LGBTQ+ individuals worry about whether the sport setting is a ‘safe place’ for them. The majority of participants in their study also felt that they had negative experiences in sports which were dominated by ‘toxic masculinity’.

For quite some time, transgender individuals have faced astronomical challenges in regard to their gender identity and its interaction within the world of youth and collegiate sports. In recent news, the Florida legislature, among other states, have proposed and passed laws preventing transgender athletes from participating in school sports programs (Wilson, 2021). Furthermore, in Idaho, legislators signed legislation permitting schools forcefully to examine and investigate the genitals of transgender children and adolescents to determine appropriate gender assigned sports teams (Dooley, 2021). Laws like these have been seen as an infringement of privacy and oppressive in nature. As laws and rules similar to the above become generalized across the country in non-accepting societal institutions, transgender athletes will face further ostracism across all sports programs which will additionally add to the transphobic nature of collegiate sports.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of the current proposed qualitative study is to better understand the experiences of collegiate athletes in the context of their gender identity. We aim to explore the role of gender identity, more specifically within female athletes and athletes who identify as gender and/or sexual minorities, in order to increase support, understanding and resources for these student-athletes on and off the field. By bringing together aspects of the intersection of gender/sexuality and sports, this will allow for a further understanding of the effects of the heterosexual and hegemonic masculine norms within sports communities and subsequent dissemination of resources and proper support to these marginalized groups.

### **Method**

#### ***Recruitment of Participants***

An email will be sent to approximately 1100 athletic directors from all NCAA affiliated colleges and universities. Contact information (email addresses) will be obtained from the publicly listed directory on the NCAA website for each college/university. Athletic directors will then be asked to disseminate the call for participation to their coaching staff and student-athlete body. In addition, recruitment email will be sent via the Temple University Sport Psychology Listserv in order to recruit additional participants via collegiate Sport Psychologists.

### ***Procedure***

After providing informed consent, gender and sexual minority student-athletes will be asked to voluntarily and anonymously complete a 10- to 15-minute online survey via Qualtrics regarding their experience in collegiate athletics as it pertains to their gender identity and/or sexual orientation. Participants will then be asked to provide demographic information regarding their sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, if they identify as transgender, race, ethnicity, age and socioeconomic status. Prompts will be presented in the form of a Likert-style scale in addition to an open-ended format. Student-athletes will also be provided with resources regarding difficult experiences in sport specific to the LGBTQ+ and female athlete community. The study will be submitted for review to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Kean University for approval prior to collecting data.

### ***Measures***

Participants will be presented with questions on demographic information such as gender, sexual assigned at birth, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, age.

To measure gender and sex role, items will be taken from two established scales: Sex Role Conflict Scale (Chusmir & Koberg, 1986) and the Athletic Sex Role Conflict Inventory (Sage & Loudermilk, 1979). Each item will be answered on a 5-point scale from “very problematic” to “not problematic at all.” Reliability for the Sex Role Conflict scale is high however no internal reliability has been reported for the Athletic Sex Role Conflict Inventory though test-retest reliability is high.

To further explore masculinity and femininity, items will be extracted from the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1975) which originally consists of 24 masculine (e.g., aggressive, active, independent) and feminine (e.g., gentle, emotional, warm) traits. Participants rate each item from 1 (less self-relevant) and 5 (more self-relevant). The questionnaire has satisfactory reliability (Helmreich et al., 1981) and is a widely used measure of gender role orientation. In addition to the PAQ, the 4-item Sexual Identity Scale (SIS; Stern et al. 1987) will be used to measure self-perceived sexual identity. Scores range from 100 (very masculine) to 500 (very feminine). Sexual Identity is derived by averaging the midpoints of the measure's four sex dimensions: (I Feel, I Look, I Do, My Interests). Reliability and both convergent and divergent validity is found to be high (Stern et al. 1987).

In terms of overall well being, the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985) will be used to assess one's overall subjective well-being. This brief, five-item measure uses a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The scale has high internal consistency and test-retest reliability. The scales measure perceived well-being in addition to convergence of peer- and self-report measures of subjective satisfaction with life which has been

found to correlate moderately to highly with SWLS scores (Pavot et al., 1991). In addition, items from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965) will be used to measure global self-esteem on a 10-point Likert scale. The measure has reported high internal consistency (Gray-Little et al., 1997) and test-retest reliability (Fleming & Courtney, 1984; McCarthy & Hoge, 1984).

Lastly, The Barriers to Physical Activity and Sport Questionnaire for LGBTQ+ persons (BPASQ-LGBTQ+; Úbeda-Colomer et al., 2020) will be utilized to measure barriers to physical activity and sports in LGBTQ+ people as well as reveal the complex and intersectional relationships between those barriers. The BPASQ-LGBTQ+ is valid and reliable and contains 17 items that encompass all spectrums of sexuality and gender and measures barriers to physical activity using a socio-ecological model.

### **Anticipated Results**

Gender and sexual identity are constructs that range on broad spectrums. Through the qualitative study of the experiences of student athletes who identify as gender and/or sexual minorities, it is hoped to bring light to the struggles that these populations may face. It is hoped that the study will not only receive adequate responses, but that the responses will be representative and diverse in demographics such as gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, age etc. It is anticipated that a majority of these student-athletes will endorse varying struggles within their sports communities in regard to the relationship between their sport and gender and/or sexual identity. It is a goal that our findings will help to increase understanding of these populations as well as increase support and resources.

An analysis will be conducted through various approaches. First and foremost, the proposed study itself will be derived from a mixed methods approach. Using aspects of qualitative and quantitative measures, participants will be assessed in a variety of ways in order to determine statistical and experiential discussions. As stated before, participants will be given various Likert-style questionnaires as well as open-ended survey questions so that participants can provide directly quoted information to illustrate their experiences. Additionally, we will be enlisting the paradigm of critical theory in order to support our basis of analysis (Grbich, 2013). This framework is designed to focus on societal class and power where the researchers locate and ameliorate instances of oppression through their research. Given that our proposed research will focus on the experiences of gender/sexual minorities within sport, we hope to focus our research on eliminating the oppression that they may face in largely hegemonic masculine and heteronormative spaces. Finally, throughout our analysis, we propose to work directly within the framework of a social justice and equity lens. As our research has become deeply rooted in social justice, we hope to provide emphasis on these issues through analysis rather than just providing numbers to research embodiments. Through the intersectionality of research and social justice, one may be able to empower

individuals who are facing historical marginalization and create a platform that does not just entertain research or social justice individually but combined as a full effort towards the betterment of society. Through the combination of these approaches, we believe that this will best fit our analysis of data and process of understanding experiences in order to fully inform our future implications and ultimately implement change.

## **Anticipated Discussion**

### ***Implications***

Given that our analysis will focus on the critical theory paradigm and social justice/equity lens, this proposed study will serve as a platform/guide in order to identify trends within collegiate sports amongst gender/sexual minorities. As we assess and create overlapping trends from various interviews and survey responses, we will be able to use these trends to bring to light the experiences that may go unseen or unheard. Through the uncovering of these trends and results, varying recommendations are hoped to be created in order to provide a general consensus in regard to sport reform, as well as a guide for athletic directors and coaches to implement in their respective programs. Given that we expect that gender/sexual minority athletes will endorse difficulty with their collegiate sport experience, we hope that this study and future research will have a lasting effect in creating safe spaces for all athletes. Through our research, we will additionally be able to bring awareness to the toxic masculine and heteronormative practices that are engrained in our present collegiate sports systems. Finally, the results of our proposed research will also allow us to assess the mental health effects of hegemonic masculinity and heterosexually dominated spaces on gender/sexual minorities. While these implications might be limited, we hope to define further cultural and societal change that our proposed study will help create thereafter.

### ***Limitations***

As with all studies, this proposed study is subject to some limitations. First, though results will be anonymous and de-identified, with the very nature of the population of study, it is possible that many student-athletes who identify as LGBTQ+ may not want to participate in the study if they are not yet “out” for fear of exposing themselves. In addition, coaches and athletic directors may not choose to participate in this study or distribute the surveys to their student athletes due to historically negative views regarding social justice for female/LGBTQ+ equality. This could have a direct impact on access to athletes which would prevent us from creating a representative sample of all athletes across the country. Finally, given the hegemonic masculinity, sexism and homophobia that takes place in sports, the sample in which we may develop may be less representative of high school and youth sport gender/sexual minority experiences given that these negative conditions may prevent athletes from participating in collegiate sports. This could

actually be assessed in future research in order to understand this environment and how it affects access to collegiate competition.

### ***Future Directions***

While our study will gather information on race, future studies should look into further classifications of ethnicity as it relates to one's identity. The intersectionality of race/ethnicity poses further opportunity for "othering" as well as microaggressions, exclusion and discrimination among student-athletes and especially among gender and sexual minority student-athletes. In addition, future studies should further assess specific identities among the LGBTQ+ umbrella as there is much variation among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, etc. identifying individuals and their experiences as athletes. In particular, more research is warranted concerning transgender athletes as the transition across the gender binary presents the sporting industry at large with many considerations and modern legislation. Finally, future research should also emphasize the importance of socioeconomic status. Given that well off, upper income (especially Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic (WEIRD)) individuals may have higher access to various goods and services, this may affect the way they are seen and regarded within sport and society. Due to this, future research could see if there are experiential differences between gender and sexual minorities on a basis of socioeconomic status.

### **Conclusion**

Currently, the world of sports is dominated by hegemonic masculinity and heterosexual norms leaving little room for fluid identity development among female and LGBTQ+ athletes. Through a critical theory lens and a mixed methods approach, it is hoped that the experiences of the marginalization of gender and sexual minority athletes, more specifically, female and LGBTQ+ collegiate athletes are better understood and consequently met with appropriate support and resource allocation.

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