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Diverse sexual and gender identities in sport

Kerrie Kauer and Vikki Krane

Sport has long been described as having a homonegative climate: one that is disinviting and often hostile toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) athletes and coaches (Griffin, 1998; Messner, 2002). Although there are signs that some sport environments are becoming open and comfortable (e.g., Kauer & Krane, 2006), it is probably safe to assume that many, if not most, sport environments are grounded in heteronormativity. That is, acknowledgment of sexual or gender identities other than heterosexual typically does not occur. Heteronormativity is the privileging of “normal” heterosexual identities and behaviors, with the concomitant assumption that everyone on the team must be heterosexual, and marginalization of other sexual and gender identities (Hall, 2003). When such assumptions permeate sport environments, intentionally or not, they send messages that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender athletes are not welcome.

In this chapter, we emphasize inclusive excellence for sport participants of all sexual and gender identities. Inclusive excellence is a concept introduced by the Association of American Colleges and Universities that re-visions diversity and inclusion to reflect new forms of excellence in learning in all aspects of higher education. Diversity is a systematic process that engages differences and transforms learning environments with a primary aim toward reflecting, supporting, and sustaining goals of inclusion and excellence (Williams, Berger, & McClendon, 2005). In other words, excellence is achieved by embracing multicultural and diverse individuals. We believe this concept is particularly appropriate for challenging the heteronormative environments of sport. Excellence already is a common goal in sport, and inclusiveness reflects the group dynamics within a team vying for excellence (Krane, 2008).

Embracing inclusive excellence includes challenging normative assumptions about gender and sexual orientation as well as recognizing the vast diversity of gender and sexual identities. Sexual orientation is one’s emotional and affectional attraction to another person, whereas sexual identity refers to individuals’ personal definitions of their sexual desires and expressions (Cho, Laub, Wall, & Daley, 2004). Gender identity is self-expression of gender, which may or may not be consistent with biological sex or social expectations related to biological sex (Cho et al., 2004). We believe it is essential to include gender identity when addressing homonegativism because often homonegative discrimination and
bullying is based on lack of adherence to “appropriate” gender presentation (Brackenridge, Rivers, Gough, & Llewellyn, 2006). Males and females not fitting traditional masculine and feminine characteristics, respectively, often are labeled as gay or lesbian (Krane, 2008). It is gender expression, not sexual orientation per se, that leads to biased, discriminatory, and possibly violent interactions (i.e., differently masculine males may be heterosexual, yet still be taunted with homonegative epithets). Individuals in an inclusive climate recognize and value the diversity of self-expression relative to gender and sexual identities. For example, Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover, an 11-year-old football player from Springfield, Massachusetts who did not identify as gay, was the target of severe homonegative taunting. Because of his choice in clothing and commitment to schoolwork, he repeatedly was called “gay” by his classmates. The tragic outcome was that he hung himself in March 2009.

Consistent with our previous work (e.g., Krane, 2008; Krane & Kauer, 2007), social identity perspective grounds our approach for creating inclusive excellence. Our primary focus is the development of team social norms that encourage productive assimilation of all team members en route to team goals. Such a focus can benefit team dynamics as well as lead to improved team productivity and performance. A major premise of the social identity perspective is that when individuals adopt new social identities, such as becoming members of a new team, they will learn the expected values and behaviors of the group, and their behaviors will become consistent with these team norms (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reichter, & Wetherell, 1987). Such actions will increase the likelihood of gaining acceptance and approval from established team members and will lead to collective esteem or team pride.

Fitting in is a strong motivator for athletes, which will often lead to the adoption of team norms to gain acceptance (Waldron & Krane, 2005). Ideally, athletes embrace healthy and productive team norms. Creating inclusive excellence depends on athletes accepting norms supporting inclusion. The team is the superordinate identity for athletes; it is the overarching identity that joins together all team members. Embracing individual differences among team members can be a strong foundation for maintaining a sense of belonging to the team (Rink & Ellemers, 2007). This sense of belonging, then, will enhance motivation and commitment (Krane, 2008). Inclusive teams appreciate sexual and gender diversity, as well as, for example, multiplicity in race and religion, and consider them as team strengths. The rest of this chapter will focus on how to develop inclusive excellence, especially as it relates to creating inclusive team norms regarding diverse sexual and gender identities on sport teams.

Developing inclusive norms and positive team climates

In this section we provide a variety of suggestions that sport psychology practitioners can use with coaches and athletes. Our approach is both proactive (developing and maintaining inclusive climates) as well as reactive (what to do in response to a negative action or climate).

Being proactive: creating inclusive excellence

Josh, a sport psychology practitioner, is approached by a new coach. First, Coach Tuttle asks Josh to work with her soccer team. Then, she also confesses that on her previous team, serious cohesion problems arose due to homophobic taunting and “accusations” that some players were lesbian. She wants to avoid such problems with her current team, but she does not know how to go about telling athletes that she thinks it’s okay if they are lesbian and that it is not okay to be prejudiced about any
personal characteristic. Coach Tuttle asks Josh what he can do to help and what advice he may have for her.

A practitioner initiating work with a team can establish the goal of developing inclusive excellence. Inclusion can be explained as acceptance of any differences among players: religion, race and ethnicity, body size/shape, skill level, age, and sexual and gender identities. The concerns voiced by the coach can be framed within the context of inclusive excellence. Making it clear that discrimination based on any social identity will impede achievement of team goals lays a foundation for guiding productive team behavior. For example, practitioners can begin a discussion about what makes a team successful (Barber & Krane, 2005). Athletes most likely will mention characteristics such as being cohesive, having good communication, trusting players, and being supportive. These concepts easily can be extended and applied to the development of inclusive excellence.

Typically, silence is the foundation for heterosexism and expectations of homonegative reactions from coaches and teammates, whereas creating safe spaces for dialogue about individual differences is a key aspect of inclusive excellence. As long as issues about sexual and gender identities remain unspoken, some LGBT athletes will assume the worst. Often silence is the outcome of not knowing how to address LGBT issues or being fearful of offending a player or teammate. Therefore, signs of acceptance are needed to create LGBT inclusive climates.

This involves publicly declaring, through visible signs, that physical premises such as your offices, team rooms, locker rooms, classrooms, or the entire facility, are ‘positive spaces.’ Respect is mandatory in such a space and lesbian and gay persons and other minorities can expect to feel welcome and secure in a safe space. The simple act of putting up posters or stickers can be extremely empowering for the minorities who participate in your programs and facilities, and sends an important message that the area is a welcoming space to lesbian and gay people.

(Corbett, 2006, p. 9)

Another component of inclusive excellence is providing overt support for diverse individuals. Many schools have “safe zone” programs that provide resources and training for faculty and staff. Coaches who have participated in this or similar programs can display a sign or sticker indicating their commitment to inclusiveness. Having books about diverse topics in sport on their bookshelves also sends a subtle yet important message (Barber & Krane, 2005). Examples include Strong Women, Deep Closets: Lesbians and Homophobia in Sport (Griffin, 1998), In the Game: Gay Athletes and the Cult of Masculinity (Anderson, 2005), Jocks 2: True Stories of America’s Gay Male Athletes (Woog, 2002), or any of a number of recent biographies of gay male athletes (e.g., Amaechi, 2007; Tewksbury, 2006; Tuaolo, 2006).

As Hornsey and colleagues (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000; Hornsey & Jetten, 2004) suggested, embracing individual differences and establishing individual distinctions as part of the foundation supporting team success creates a strong framework for cohesion and productive team norms. One step toward such inclusion is showing interest in the activities of diverse team members. For example, during ordinary conversations coaches can mention the Gay Games, if they are in the news, or talk about openly LGBT athletes, such as mentioning out athletes competing in the Olympics (e.g., Australian diver Matthew Mitcham, U.S. soccer player Natasha Kai). Awareness of pronoun use and unintended heterosexist inferences is another
strategy for normalizing diverse gender and sexual identities. For example, using the term partner instead of boyfriend allows lesbian athletes to become part of a conversation. Always saying he or she when talking about dating or about who’s going with whom to special events includes all team members in the conversation, regardless of sexual orientation. Such language may open athletes’ minds to the possibility that a teammate may have a same-sex partner or date. Importantly, such language also sets a tone of inclusion. Applying an inclusive excellence model begins to change the atmosphere of the team. As Rink and Ellemers (2007) found, as athletes recognize individual characteristics and identities, they acknowledge that they are meaningful contributions to team success.

**Teachable moments**

Avery was “out” to many friends in his high school, but the team climate on his club soccer team made him fearful to tell anyone connected to the team. Almost daily, in practices and in the locker room, Avery heard his teammates and coaches use words such as faggot, sissy, and homo as well as make other derogatory comments about gay males. Although he hated hiding his partner from his teammates, whom he considered close friends, he did not feel it would be safe to come out to them.

Often coaches and athletes do not recognize the power of their words or the implicit messages they send. Given the strong heteronormative climate of sport, it is likely many athletes assume that everyone on the team is heterosexual, and they do not consider how hurtful some words could be to someone. Unfortunately, in many sport environments, using homonegative language is standard (Curry, 1991). Having a commitment from coaches, as well as sport psychology practitioners, is integral to changing homophobic and heterosexist environments. Having the coach’s 100% active backing of anti-homophobic language and environment would be ideal; however, this support might not always be the case. Practitioners may want to consult with coaches regarding their roles in creating environments that work toward inclusion with the intent on creating excellence. Within the framework of inclusive excellence, not only are athletes challenged to confront unproductive team norms, a structure and support for doing so are created.

For this example, we offer two suggestions for practitioners: (a) challenging the athletes to consider that not all male athletes are straight, and (b) changing the team norms surrounding their language. An important first step in making these changes is talking about the issue. Initiating such a conversation for the first time may feel uncomfortable or intimidating. Nevertheless, there are a number of ways to introduce the topic. If the practitioner is just beginning to work with a team, a statement noting her or his discomfort with the commonly used homonegative language could provide an opening. Alternatively, if the practitioner hears a comment directed at a particular player, that may provide an opportunity for dialogue. For example, during conditioning Pete starts complaining. John replies, “Quit being such a fag, suck it up and keep going.” The coach or practitioner could say “That kind of commentary is not appropriate here.” The comment is likely to get some laughter or strange looks, but the conversation can continue, “Maybe someone else here is gay or maybe someone has a gay brother, cousin, or friend … ” In this instance, the dialogue may lead athletes to consider that they may actually know someone who is a gay male and that their language is insulting and hurtful toward that person. Obviously, a single brief exchange is not going to change common attitudes and language, but the door has been opened for further discussion and for reproaching subsequent use of homonegative language.
It is critical that team leaders model and encourage acceptable language as well as constructively point out when teammates use insensitive words (Krane, 2008). Practitioners and coaches can, and should, teach positive leadership. Such lessons can be imparted to select individuals (e.g., captains, oldest members of a team, individuals teammates already look up to). Athlete leaders should be taught to consider it their responsibility to encourage respect of all players. Providing athlete leaders with pre-determined statements in response to homonegative language will be especially helpful. Sport psychology practitioners often teach athletes to use thought stoppage to change unproductive thoughts, and an initial step is to determine acceptable replacement thoughts. In this situation, athlete leaders can brainstorm acceptable responses to teammates’ cavalier homonegative commentary. To carry the thought stoppage analogy further, all team members can be instructed to say STOP anytime they say or hear a homonegative comment. In this way, teammates encourage each other to change unacceptable language. Concurrently, alternative phrases need to be introduced. Replacement terms such as doofus or dingbat may get a laugh, but at the same time, athletes will begin to recognize that homonegative language is as unacceptable as racist and other derogatory language. Although not easy, changing team norms is possible; challenging athletes to take responsibility for redirecting team norms is an important step in creating inclusive excellence.

Lindsey is a member of a high profile university field hockey team. She has been in a relationship with another female athlete on campus for several years, but has never mentioned it to her teammates. One day in the locker room after practice, one of the captains comes up to Lindsey taunting her about her disgusting relationship with Carmen. Several other players join the banter, which turns ugly. The coach overhears just enough of the discussion to understand what is going on and decides that she needs to intervene and discuss the situation with the team. The coach spends the whole evening and next day agonizing about how to go about addressing this issue.

It seems that too often coaches are not willing to take a strong stand upon hearing about intra-team conflict regarding sexual orientation. Often coaches believe that it is not their place to discuss athletes’ personal lives or that other professionals should address these issues (Krane & Barber, 2005). Nevertheless, coaches using an inclusive excellence framework accept responsibility for making sport a safe place for all athletes. Gaining coach “buy-in” may be challenging, yet sport psychology practitioners who explain the potential benefits of supporting inclusion and diversity may gain the support of coaches. For example, embracing the individuality and skills of all team members can lead to improved team communication, motivation, and performance (Krane, 2008).

Within an inclusive excellence approach, the sport psychology practitioner can assist the coach in addressing the team climate. In this example, the coach and sport psychology practitioner decide that the coach will meet with Lindsey before talking with the whole team. She will state her support for Lindsey, give her a “heads-up” that the issue will be talked about with the team that afternoon, and give her a choice of whether or not she wants to be at the meeting. Next, the coach and practitioner develop a plan for approaching the team as a whole.

The coach can express her disappointment with the discriminatory nature of the comments while at the same time taking an educational approach to explain why it is not productive among teammates striving toward the same goals. The discussion can be framed within the context of team goals. Players can be asked to reiterate their aspirations and to highlight
how each athlete contributes to team excellence. Then, if not mentioned by the athletes, the sport psychology practitioner can explain how homonegativism among teammates will interfere with team goals – that is, impede inclusive excellence. Further, if needed, the coach or sport psychology practitioner can talk about how sport is changing; that although at one time it was acceptable to exclude players because of skin color or use racially derogatory language, no longer do we support such practices in sport. Today, there is recognition that some athletes are LGBT. Just as racially charged language is insensitive, so too is negative commentary referring to sexual orientation or gender identity. Throughout the conversation, the focus on inclusive excellence will point athletes toward productive behaviors and may initiate attitude changes among team members.

Dialogue about gender identity

Tracy is a member of a high-level track club. Consistently, she is one of the top sprinters on the team, and her current goal is to compete at national level. For years, Tracy has grappled with her gender identity. She has never felt comfortable “being female.” Although she has never self-identified as lesbian, she often has been the target of homonegative actions by her peers. After talking with her parents, who were exceptionally understanding and supportive, she has begun identifying as male. At this time, Tracy has not taken any hormones, but has changed her appearance (e.g., shorter hair, baggier clothes) and has asked that male pronouns be used.

An aspect of inclusive excellence is appreciation for diversity within gender identity. The team sport psychology practitioner can work with Tracy to help him feel comfortable discussing these issues with teammates. Alternatively, the sport psychology consultant can act as a resource and assist team members in understanding Tracy’s gender identity. Very likely, a combination of these approaches will be helpful. Perhaps framing the issue as relating to team dynamics and inclusive excellence will help team members understand the significance of supporting their teammates. Helping teammates focus on inclusive excellence can reinforce a climate in which Tracy can focus on performance, rather than manage criticism and bigotry.

The sport psychologist working with the team can gather resources, such as information from the Women’s Sport Foundation (2008a) – in particular the *It Takes a Team* educational materials (e.g., Women’s Sport Foundation, 2008b). If the sport psychology practitioner is comfortable with the content, she or he can lead a discussion about transathletes and assist in dispelling myths or misinformation. The term “transgender” encompasses an array of different forms of gender identity. In general, transgender refers to gender identities that do not coincide with the gender assigned at birth (Plante, 2006). Some transgender people, such as Tracy, are not comfortable with the gender assigned to them, yet also do not desire to undergo physical changes to their bodies. Transsexuals are people who use hormone therapy and who have had sex reassignment surgery (Cho et al., 2004). In Tracy’s situation, he is not undergoing any hormonal or anatomical changes to his physiology or anatomy, but he is making changes in gender expression. Because he has not undergone hormone therapy, Tracy is only changing his outward appearance. His body is no different than it was previously and there are no performance advantages. At the present time, Tracy has no desire to compete on a male team and wishes to remain a part of the female team with which he has established cohesion, and dedicated many hours. Through team discussions, the practitioner can reinforce team commitment to inclusive excellence. By supporting Tracy, the team
will be reinforcing norms of inclusion as well as continuing progress toward team performance goals. If the sport psychology practitioner does not feel comfortable leading this discussion, she or he can bring in individuals from a university LGBT resource center, women's center, or multicultural center to help.

Summary

In this chapter, we challenge sport psychologists to embrace inclusive excellence and work toward eliminating heterosexism and homonegativism in sport. Because language creates a structure for understanding the norms in sport (Sykes, 1998), a prominent focus in this chapter has been to challenge and change heteronormative language on sport teams. Employing the strategies and proactive measures provided in this chapter can work toward this end. Heterosexism and homonegativism adversely affect all participants in sport, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. These institutionalized and systematic behaviors and norms create unproductive (and often hostile) team climates and further embed heteronormativity in sport. Applying an inclusive excellence model to sport provides concrete examples for how to approach these issues.

Inclusive excellence provides a framework for sport psychology consultants to address issues of diversity within sport teams. Combined with our social identity perspective, developing productive team norms while viewing individual difference as a team strength can create a sense of belonging for all team members. Thus, all members, regardless of gender and sexual expression, can feel part of a larger structure that values and supports them. Within this context, sport then provides social and psychological benefits to all of its participants, even if they do not fit into dominant gender or sexual ideologies.

Sport psychology practitioners who embrace inclusive excellence will help change the existing culture of sport where heterosexism is the norm. Although changing established team climates will be challenging, we believe that sport psychology practitioners can and should be at the forefront of such a movement. It is our hope that this chapter will allow existing and future professionals to rise to that challenge and work toward a type of excellence that values each team member and embraces everyone who shares a common love – sport! See Box 43.1 for a summary of strategies for developing inclusive excellence.

Box 43.1

Strategies for developing inclusive excellence

- Establish a superordinate identity as “team member” that embraces all athletes.
- Recognize diversity in gender identity, sexual orientation, race, religion, and other social identities as a team strength.
- Use inclusive language and avoid assumptions that everyone on the team is heterosexual or gender normative.
- Encourage open conversation about individual differences.
- Openly display signs of support for diverse sexual and gender identities (e.g., with “safe zone” stickers, LGBT-focused books).
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- Educate team members about the diversity among gender and sexual identities.
- Refer to available resources (e.g., campus organizations, websites such as www.ittakesateam.org) as necessary.
- Encourage athletes, especially team leaders, to model productive inclusive behaviors and challenge unproductive team norms.

References


