

## Attitudes and Sexual Prejudice in Sport and Physical Activity

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### **Abstract:**

This study focused on attitudes and sexual prejudice as part of a larger project on inclusive practice in sport and physical activity settings. Questionnaires were administered to a large sample of undergraduate students and to selected samples of upper-level preprofessional students and a campus pride group to investigate attitudes toward gays and lesbians, and other minority groups. Attitude scores were in the middle range, with females more positive than males toward gay men. Evaluation Thermometer scores were generally positive, but markedly lower for gay men and lesbians than for other minority groups. Upper-level preprofessional students were more positive than other undergraduates, but still expressed negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. These results confirm persistent sexual prejudice, suggest that attention to sexual minorities is particularly important for effective diversity management, and underscore the need for continuing research and educational programs to enhance cultural competence among sport management professionals and future professionals.

### **Article:**

The current study on sexual prejudice is the first step in a larger project aimed at developing cultural competencies among professionals and providing safe, inclusive sport and physical activity programs for all participants. In this study, we examined attitudes toward racial/ethnic minority groups as well as older adults and persons with disabilities, but focused on perceptions of sexual minorities, particularly gay men and lesbians. Considerable research documents pervasive sexism and heterosexism in the world of competitive sport. Although scholarly research on the wider range of sport and physical activity settings is limited, national reports from the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute (Rankin, 2003), Human Rights Watch (2001), and the Kaiser Family Foundation (2001), as well as observations and anecdotal evidence, suggest that sport settings are particularly hostile environments for lesbian/gay/bisexual (LGB) youth. This literature also suggests that fitness clubs, sports medicine facilities, and recreational physical activity programs generally do not welcome gay men and lesbians. This study focuses on sexual prejudice among students and future professionals who will work in the wider range of sport and physical activity settings.

As Stockdale and Crosby (2004) emphasize in their edited volume on workplace diversity, effective diversity management and the development of multi-culturally inclusive organizations is a challenge for all workplace environments. Recently, sports management scholars have extended the call for diversity from business to sport organizations. For example, Perrin's (2000) editorial statement in the primary research and professional journal for sports medicine and athletic training is a strong call for diversity in that related sport profession. Fink and Pastore (1999) cited business literature to suggest a framework for diversity initiatives in intercollegiate athletic organizations and called on sport professionals to be proactive to realize the benefits of diversity management. Finally, Cunningham (2004) drew on organizational and social psychology literature to suggest strategies for dealing with possible negative effects of diversity in sport settings. Given that sport is far more diverse in participants and settings than most workplaces, diversity and cultural competence is a particularly relevant concern for sport management professionals, and we affirm these calls for attention to diversity. We contend that sport management professionals have a professional obligation to create safe, inclusive environments that offer the benefits of physical activity for health and well-being to all participants, including sexual minorities.

Considerable psychological research confirms that persistent sexual prejudice and hostile climates are faced by LGB individuals in our society (e.g., Herek, 1998b). In their comprehensive review, Lubensky, Holland, Wiethoff, and Crosby (2004) document changes in attitudes and treatment of LGB persons in society and the workplace, but note that despite greater acceptance and selected gay-friendly workplaces, sexual prejudice and discrimination persist. Moreover, sexual prejudice leads to lower productivity and negative attitudes within organizations (Ragins & Cornwell, 2001). Within sport organizations, we are not only concerned with employees, customers, and immediate productivity, but also with long-term health and well-being; hostile climates can have devastating effects on participants and society.

Research on specific attitudes and sexual prejudice in sport settings is limited, particularly in the wide range of youth and recreational sport settings, but considerable sport studies work on gender and sexuality suggests a particularly hostile environment for gay men and lesbians that promotes homophobia. For example, Messner and Sabo (1994) have drawn connections among sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, and violence, and Messner (1992) contends that homophobia in sport promotes violence in many forms: men against women, men against men, and men against themselves. Several scholars have begun to apply queer theory, as well as feminist perspectives, to further elucidate connections among sexism, heterosexism, and sport. Often these scholars have viewed women's sport participation through these lenses, including Griffin's (1998) examination of the homophobia, discrimination, and sexism experienced by lesbians in sport. Broad (2001) specifically takes a queer theory perspective and argues that women's sport participation may be interpreted as queer resistance and a gendered unapologetic. Although not as well developed as the scholarship on gender and race in sport, queer theory is expanding our perspectives and offering insights into the experiences of sexual minorities (e.g., Messner, 1996; Sykes, 1998). Most of that scholarship focuses on homophobia and competitive athletics, with few scholars examining sexual prejudice in physical activity in public schools, recreational settings, or exercise programs.

Although the sport studies scholarship informs our research, the current study is more directly in line with psychology work on perceptions and prejudice. Discrimination and prejudice on the basis of sexual orientation is often described as homophobia, but we follow Herek (2000), a leading psychology scholar on LGB issues, who prefers *sexual prejudice*. Sexual prejudice conveys no assumptions about underlying motives or psychopathology, but the term instead conveys the social context and dynamics of bias against sexual minorities. As Herek notes, sexual prejudice is an attitude (evaluation), directed at a social group (in this case, LGB people), and it is negative, involving hostility or dislike. Current psychological theory and research on LGB issues, such as D'Augelli's (1994) lifespan developmental model of sexual orientation and identity, highlights social relationships and context, in contrast to pathologizing approaches. These current psychology works provide the framework for much applied psychology, including both organizational psychology and sport and exercise psychology, and we follow that psychology framework in this study.

Considerable psychology research documents the victimization of gay and lesbian youth (Rivers & D'Augelli, 2001; Ryan & Futterman, 1998). In the initial report of the ongoing American Psychological Association (APA) *The Healthy LGB Students Project*, Ryan (2000) notes that LGB youth have the same risks as their heterosexual peers but also face additional challenges because of their stigmatized identity—sexual prejudice. Despite the extensive review of over 190 articles, Ryan concludes that the extant literature provides little empirical data, and much outdated and inaccurate information. The hostile environment faced by LGB youth in public schools carries into college and university settings, the site of much sport professional practice. Evans (2001) cites numerous studies that document continuing sexual prejudice on college campuses. Negative attitudes toward LGB students persist, and most LGB students report harassment incidents with related negative psychological and social consequences.

The APA has adopted guidelines for psychotherapy with LGB clients that recognize the importance of understanding social processes and context, and specifically sexual prejudice (APA, 2000). As Greene (1994) reports, gay men and lesbians face negative bias even in psychology, which has high lesbian and gay visibility and official policies that promote diversity and inclusion. Certainly, sport and physical activity settings, which

often lack such policies and visibility, are likely to be hostile and unhealthy environments for LGB individuals. Public schools, institutions, and businesses typically have nondiscrimination policies, but sexual orientation is seldom included. Lipkin (2001) argues forcefully for the inclusion of homosexuality in teacher education programs and refers to its absence as inexcusable dereliction. Most future sport and physical activity professionals do not receive even limited diversity training and multicultural education. Morrow and Gill (2003) recently reported that both physical education teachers and students witnessed high levels of homophobic and heterosexist behaviors in public schools, but that teachers failed to confront those behaviors. We argue that sport psychologists must follow the APA guidelines to be comprehensive in their research and competent in their practice. Similarly, sport management professionals have an obligation to understand their employees, the participants, and the social context of their sport setting to promote inclusive practices.

In this study we used current models and measures from the psychology work on sexual prejudice to assess attitudes of preprofessional students. We also examined overall attitudes toward racial/ethnic minorities, older adults, and persons with disabilities, as well as toward gay men and lesbians. By examining evaluative attitudes toward several minority groups, we may confirm high levels of sexual prejudice suggested by anecdotal reports and research in other areas. The current results will provide a base to help us refine research methods, implement educational programs, and move toward a more inclusive sport management profession.

### *Method*

The current study involves two phases with similar measures but distinct samples. First, we assessed attitudes toward minority groups with a relatively large sample of undergraduate students, including a large number of beginning preprofessional students in exercise and sport science (ESS). In Phase 2, we surveyed selected groups of upper-level ESS preprofessional students and a campus pride group with a significant number of sexual minority participants.

### **Participants and Procedures**

In Phase 1, questionnaires were administered to students in all sections of a “Fitness for Life” course, a beginning course required of ESS majors that also serves a wide range of students from across campus. The course coordinator and instructors were contacted in advance to arrange a time within a 2-week block. Questionnaire packets with demographic information and the attitude measures for this study were administered at the beginning of class by one of the investigators (usually the principal investigator). Participation was voluntary, consent forms were separated from packets, and confidential questionnaires were returned in an envelope. All students contacted completed the questionnaires ( $n = 150$ ), and only one packet was discarded because of incomplete or unusable data.

In Phase 2, questionnaires were administered to three selected groups: ESS student teachers, ESS interns, and a campus pride group. Interns ( $n = 14$ ) were working at fitness and exercise programs, and student teachers ( $n = 8$ ) were student teaching in the public schools. The pride participants ( $n = 27$ ) belonged to a university group that promotes nondiscrimination and supports LGB students.

Questionnaire packets were administered at the beginning of a group meeting, and all present completed the questionnaires. An educational session followed with a video on gay/lesbian youth in sport, educational materials on promoting inclusive practice, and group discussion, but the instructions were the same as in Phase 1, and all packets were turned in before the session.

### *Measures*

***Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men.*** The Attitudes toward Lesbians and Gay Men Scale (ATLG; Herek, 1994, 1998a) includes two 5-item subscales: Attitudes Toward Gay men (ATG), and Attitudes Toward Lesbians (ATL). All items are agree/disagree ratings on a 1-5 scale. Higher scores indicate more *negative* attitudes. Herek’s ATLG measure has gone through several developmental stages, has good reliability and validity, and is the most widely used measure of sexual prejudice in psychology research. In this study, internal consistency was good ( $\alpha = .79$  for ATL;  $.84$  for ATG).

**Evaluation Thermometer.** The Evaluation Thermometer (Haddock & Zanna, 1998; Haddock, Zanna & Esses, 1993) is a single-item measure that assesses the overall positive or negative evaluation toward a particular group. Respondents circle a number on the 0-100 thermometer, with the positive end anchored by 100 (*extremely favorable*), the negative end anchored by 0 (*extremely unfavorable*), and the 50-degree mark (*neither favorable nor unfavorable*). Our respondents completed the Evaluation Thermometer for five racial/ethnic groups—African, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, and White/European—and for four other minority groups: gay men, lesbians, older adults, and people with physical disabilities. The measure has been used in several studies, and in the ongoing American National Election Studies; Yang (1997) reported that despite a 10-point increase from 1984 to 1996, gays and lesbians remain among the lowest of groups rated with the thermometer.

At the end of the packet, respondents completed a demographic information sheet including gender, age, racial/ethnic identification, sexual orientation (Kinsey scale), and exercise and sport experience. The packets also included ratings of the climate for different minority groups in exercise and sport settings, but those measures are not part of the current study.

### **Results and Discussion**

The primary analyses were descriptive, and we also grouped the two ATLG subscales, the four non-race/ethnicity Evaluation Thermometer items, and the five race/ethnicity thermometer items for separate multivariate comparisons. For the larger Phase 1 sample, the primary MANOVA was a between-subjects comparison by gender (male, female), with within-subjects comparisons by measures (i.e., ATL v. ATG, or comparisons among thermometer groups). We also did exploratory MANOVA comparisons by college major (ESS, other) and by race/ethnicity (African American, White-European, other). For Phase 2, the primary MANOVA analyses were comparisons of the three groups (student teachers, interns, pride group members), which were collapsed for a comparison of two groups (ESS, pride) with relatively equal numbers. Exploratory MANOVA comparisons were also done by gender (male, female) and by sexual orientation (predominantly heterosexual, homosexual) according to the Kinsey Scale as the sample was approximately evenly divided between those identifying as exclusively heterosexual (0 on Kinsey rating) and those identifying as predominantly homosexual (5 or 6).

### **Sample Demographics**

The Phase 1 sample included approximately equal numbers of males ( $n = 65$ ) and females ( $n = 84$ ), with a mean age of 20.7 years. Age ranged from 17 to 46, but most were 18-20, with only 9 over age 25. The class has large numbers of beginning students, but students were distributed across the class years with 58 freshmen, 31 sophomores, 37 juniors, and 22 seniors. Of the total, 41 were ESS majors and future professionals, and 96 were in other majors. Most were White/European ( $n = 102$ ), with a significant number of African Americans ( $n = 33$ ), and small numbers of Asian ( $n = 2$ ), Hispanic ( $n = 4$ ), Native American ( $n = 1$ ), and Other ( $n = 7$ ) students.

Given our emphasis on sexual prejudice, we also assessed sexual orientation using the Kinsey Scale, which asks respondents to use a 0-1-2-3-4-5-6 rating with 0 = *exclusively heterosexual*, 3 = *equally heterosexual and homosexual*, and 6 = *exclusively homosexual*. Although we expected a sample of 150 students to have enough identifying themselves as bisexual-homosexual to make comparisons, that was not the case. Almost all respondents ( $n = 143$ ) circled the 0 (exclusively heterosexual), with 3 circling 1, 2, or 3 (toward heterosexual) and only 3 circling 4, 5, or 6 (toward homosexual). Moreover, our observations of the completed questionnaires during data coding revealed that many respondents made special efforts to make sure their rating was obvious. Several circled the “0” multiple times, and added notes indicating they were *definitely, exclusively heterosexual* to make sure they were not mistakenly classified. No one made such efforts to make sure their gender, age, or race/ethnicity was so clearly interpreted.

In Phase 2, both ESS groups were predominantly female, with one male intern, whereas the pride group included more females ( $n = 17$ ) than males ( $n = 10$ ). The sample was predominantly White/European with two

African Americans in each of the pride and intern groups, one Asian American in the student teacher group, and two indicating “other” in pride. Most student teachers and interns were predominantly heterosexual (scores 0-2) with three ESS students predominantly homosexual (scores 4-6). Most pride students ( $n = 22$ ) were bisexual or homosexual, and five were heterosexual. Approximately equal numbers indicated exclusively heterosexual (Kinsey score of 0), and predominantly homosexual (5 or 6), allowing a comparison of those two groups.

### **MANOVA Results—Phase 1**

For all MANOVA analyses, we used the GLM procedure of the SPSS program with within-subjects contrasts comparing measures (e.g., attitudes toward gays vs. attitudes toward lesbians) as well as between-subjects factors (e.g., gender). Our primary MANOVA comparisons involved relatively equal numbers in comparison groups, and examination of variances and covariance matrices revealed relative consistency, but we used Pillai's criterion for multivariate effects, and ran analyses with Type I sum of squares as suggested for unequal groups (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). The Phase 1 gender MANOVA on ATL and ATG scores revealed a strong within-subjects difference between attitudes toward gays and lesbians,  $F(1, 144) = 78.50, p < .001, \eta^2 = .35$ , with attitude scores higher (more negative) for gay men. The overall between-subjects gender effect did not reach statistical significance,  $F(1, 144) = 3.37, p = .07$ , but the Gender  $\times$  ATL/ATG interaction was significant,  $F(1, 144) = 14.02, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$ . As seen in Table 1, which includes all the scores for Phase 1 by gender indicates, the difference between ATL and ATG scores was greater for males, who were much more negative on ATG.

The Evaluation Thermometer MANOVA with the five racial/ethnic groups revealed a within-subjects difference on ratings,  $F(4, 142) = 10.84, p < .001, \eta^2 = .23$ , but no between-subjects gender effect, or Gender  $\times$  Ratings interaction. Evaluation scores were all relatively high, but lower for all racial/ethnic minority groups than for White/Europeans, and lowest for Hispanics. The MANOVA on evaluations for the other four minority groups (gays, lesbians, older, disabilities) also revealed a within-subjects difference on ratings,  $F(3, 144) = 85.83, p < .001, \eta^2 = .64$ , that was much stronger than the difference among racial/ethnic minority group ratings. Also, both the overall between-subjects gender effect,  $F(1, 144) = 5.42, p < .05, \eta^2 = .04$ , and the Gender  $\times$  Minority group interaction,  $F(1, 144) = 5.84, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$ , were significant. Evaluations of gay men were much lower than ratings of other groups, and both lesbians and gay men were rated much more negatively than older adults or those with disabilities. The interaction indicates that those differences among ratings are greater for males than for females.

No differences by race/ethnicity were evident, and ESS majors (future professionals) did not differ from the other students. Overall ATLG scores were in the middle range, with attitudes toward lesbians (ATL) more positive than attitudes toward gay men (ATG). The Evaluation Thermometer scores (range 0 to 100) were generally positive, but were markedly lower and negative for gay men (38.2) and lesbians (44.7). Generally, both females and males were positive on evaluations of all groups, except for notably lower ratings of gay men and lesbians, and males were more negative in their evaluations and attitudes toward gay men.

### **MANOVA Results—Phase 2**

We initially ran a MANOVA with three groups for Phase 2, but the two ESS groups (student teachers, interns) did not differ on any measures; therefore, we collapsed responses from the persons in those groups into one ESS group that was compared with the pride group in the MANOVA. In contrast to Phase 1, the within-subjects ATG/ATL difference and the Group  $\times$  ATG/ATL interaction were both nonsignificant, but the overall between-subjects group effect was significant,  $F(1, 46) = 10.16, p < .05, \eta^2 = .18$ , with the ESS groups having higher and more negative attitude scores.

The results were similar for the MANOVA procedures on Evaluation Thermometer scores with no within-subjects differences among ratings, and stronger between-groups differences for both racial/ethnic minority group ratings,  $F(1, 45) = 4.39, p <$

.05,  $T_{12} = .09$ , and gay/lesbian/older/disabilities (G/L/O/D) ratings,  $F(1, 45) = 14.19, p < .001, T_{12} = .24$ . Also, the Group  $\times$  Rating interaction was significant for G/L/O/D ratings,  $F(1, 45) = 7.56, p < .001, T_{12} = .35$ . As Table 1 indicates, the pride group was

**Table 1 MANOVA Results for Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men Scale (ATLG) and Evaluation Thermometer Measures**

Measure	Phase 1			Phase 2		
	Male	Female	Total	ESS	Pride	Total
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
ATG	18.2 (5.5)	15.6 (5.9)	16.7 (5.8)	11.5 (5.4)	7.5 (4.8)	9.2 (5.4)
ATL	14.4 (4.9)	13.9 (4.8)	14.1 (4.8)	10.6 (3.6)	7.3 (3.3)	8.8 (3.7)
Gay	29.2 (30.2)	45.9 (30.2)	38.6 (31.2)	71.4 (28.0)	95.0 (9.1)	84.5 (22.9)
Lesbian	42.9 (31.1)	47.0 (31.1)	45.2 (31.0)	69.5 (24.6)	97.7 (5.1)	85.1 (21.9)
Older	80.6 (22.8)	84.9 (20.3)	83.0 (21.5)	88.6 (19.3)	91.5 (14.6)	90.2 (16.7)
Disabilities	80.9 (21.0)	84.7 (18.1)	83.0 (19.5)	82.8 (20.8)	91.2 (13.9)	87.5 (17.6)
				<b>Evaluation Thermometer (racial/ethnic groups)</b>		
African American	81.9 (19.8)	81.2 (23.4)	81.5 (21.8)	80.5 (25.0)	94.2 (12.4)	88.1 (20.1)
Hispanic	75.4 (23.9)	73.7 (26.3)	74.4 (25.2)	81.9 (21.1)	92.7 (16.9)	87.9 (19.4)
Asian	79.2 (20.3)	78.6 (23.0)	78.8 (21.8)	83.8 (18.6)	92.3 (14.5)	88.5 (16.8)
Native American	82.2 (18.0)	82.5 (20.1)	82.4 (19.1)	83.3 (20.6)	95.4 (11.0)	90.0 (16.9)
White/European	85.6 (18.6)	85.8 (20.1)	85.7 (19.4)	87.6 (16.4)	90.8 (13.2)	89.4 (14.7)

Note. Subscales ATG = Attitudes Toward Gay Men, and ATL = Attitudes Toward Lesbians.

more positive than the ESS groups on all ratings, with especially strong differences for both ATG/ATL scores and ratings of gay men and lesbians.

Additional MANOVAs revealed sexual orientation differences, and no gender differences. The sexual orientation classification overlapped the ESS/pride classification, and all MANOVA results were similar; that is, all statistically significant effects for the ESS/pride MANOVAs were also significant for the sexual orientation MANOVAs, and the specific values hardly varied. Pride group members and predominantly homosexual students were more positive on both ATLG scores than were heterosexual students and ESS groups, and also

had more positive ratings of gay men, lesbians, African Americans, and Native Americans. Overall evaluation scores were positive for all ethnic minority groups, older adults, and disabled persons, but lower for gay men and lesbians. Although no direct statistical comparisons were made, all three groups in Phase 2, including upper-level ESS preprofessionals, were more positive than the Phase 1 sample on ATLG scores and ratings of gay men and lesbians.

### Conclusions

Overall, the attitudes of our preprofessional students toward gay men and lesbians are similar to attitudes reported in other samples (Evans, 2001; Herek, 2000; Rankin, 2003) and reflect the sexual prejudice in society and within the sport context specifically. Evaluation scores were notably lower and more negative for both gay men and lesbians than for other minority groups, with males possessing especially negative attitudes toward gay men. As noted, many students went out of their way to indicate that they were exclusively heterosexual on their Kinsey rating. The focus on that item, in combination with the results, reflects the social acceptance of sexual prejudice. It is encouraging that the advanced ESS preprofessional students are more positive in their attitudes and evaluations than the beginning-level students, but many of these future sport and physical activity professionals hold negative attitudes toward sexual minorities. We underscore the calls of Fink and Pastore (1999) and Cunningham (2004), for proactive diversity initiatives in sport management. Our results confirm the persistence of sexual prejudice, and suggest attention to sexual minorities is particularly important for effective diversity management. If we are to secure the benefits of diverse, inclusive sport programs for all, including sexual minorities, multicultural education and cultural competence programs for sport management professionals and future professionals are essential.

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