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The Role of LGBT-focused Sport Group Involvement in Reducing Minority Stress

Project Summary

OBJECTIVES

Sexual minority identity (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans; LGBT) is largely stigmatized and stigmatization has been linked to detrimental mental and physical health outcomes. Sexual minority individuals are often motivated to conceal their identities to protect themselves from rejection but this concealment comes with the costs of anxiety about disclosure and preoccupation with concealment.

Contact with others who share a concealable stigma enhances psychological well-being and such contact builds a sense of belonging to the stigmatized group, enhances identity acceptance, and leads to greater identity disclosure.

For sexual minorities, LGBT-focused sport groups offer a social context with the potential to create many of these benefits. However, little research has been done to examine the consequences of LGBT-focused sport group involvement for enhancing individual and collective identity, and for enhancing identity disclosure among sexual minority adults. In this study we examine the association of involvement in LGBT-focused sport groups with diverse potential social, sport-related, and identity benefits for sexual minority adults.

CONCLUSIONS

Drawing from analyses conducted for conference presentations, undergraduate and graduate theses, and research manuscripts the following conclusions can be drawn:

- Cross-sectional analyses show that LGBT-focused sport group involvement increases likelihood of identity disclosure by increasing a sense of belonging to the LGBT community and reducing negative self-perceptions related to sexual orientation (i.e., internalized homophobia)
- Longitudinal analyses show that having social and identity needs met in the sport group enhances participants' commitment to the sport
- Longitudinal analyses show that having identity needs met in the sport group enhances "coming out" in everyday life

Research Methods

Participants were recruited from sexual minority-focuses sport groups in a large Canadian city. These groups represented a variety of individual and team sports (e.g., softball/baseball; curling; soccer; volleyball; bowling; water polo; basketball; ice hockey; rugby; tennis; running). After providing an email address, participants were sent an individualized link to an online survey. In total, 320 participants took part at baseline and 224 of the baseline participants took part in the follow-up survey.

Broadly, the survey at both time points assessed demographic characteristics, degree of involvement in the sport group, affiliation with the group and the broader LGBT community, management of sexual minority identity in everyday life, and measures of well-being.

Sample Characteristics: Average Age: 37 (SD = 9.91, min = 20, max = 68); Sex: 60% male, 37% female, 0.6% trans, 1.6% diverse response (e.g., genderqueer, not defined); Sexual Orientation Identity: regardless of sex, 62% gay, 27% lesbian, 2% bisexual, remainder unlabeled, other. Average time in first listed sport group: 7 yrs (SD = 5.67, min = 1, max = 26); Frequency of participation: Attend practice: once/week or more ☑ over 60%; Attend sport group social outings: once/month or more ☑ over 60%; Volunteer for sport group: any degree ☑ 24%.

Research Results

Drawing on the diverse forms of information available with the cross-sectional and longitudinal survey data, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- With preliminary analyses of baseline data, LGBT-focused sport group involvement, in particular, the degree to which the sport group is a source of friendship and social support, was linked to greater identity disclosure. With mediation analyses, this was explained by enhanced sense of belonging to the LGBT-community and reduced internalized homophobia
 - In analyses of longitudinal data, the more the sport group was a source of social bonding and affirmative identity expression, the more committed participants were to the group (e.g., higher ratings of value, enjoyment, and investment in the sport group).
 - In further longitudinal analyses, greater identity affirmation in the sport group led to increased sexual minority identity disclosure in everyday life (i.e., “coming out”).
 - The strengths of this research include the longitudinal nature of the data which allows tests of causation. In terms of limitations, there may be selection biases and no claim can be made that participants represent all sexual minorities in Canada (e.g., it is unknown if sport group participation would necessarily be helpful for all sexual minorities).
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Policy Implications

The research findings show that involvement in LGBT-focused sport groups are an important resource to help overcome the negative consequences of stigmatization. As such, policies that support or enhance development of LGBT-focused sport would be most relevant (e.g., access to municipal/community facilities for LGBT-focused sport, encouraging development of such groups at local and regional levels).

Next Steps

There are several unanswered and new questions raised by research e.g.:

- Would those with other stigmatized identities benefit from identity-focused sport?
- How does this research contribute to a larger discussion of integration in sport? (e.g., is integration/inclusion necessarily beneficial? If so, for whom?).
- This research was carried out in a large city with a high-profile LGBT community. What are the experiences of those who take part in LGBT-focused sport in smaller towns or rural areas with less LGBT visibility?

Key Stakeholders and Benefits

- Local and regional LGBT-focused sport organizations
- Other municipal and regional sport organizations