

Lesbians and Locker Rooms:
The Subjective Experiences of Lesbians in Sport

by Caroline Fusco

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Science

Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation Studies
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**LESBIANS AND LOCKER ROOMS:
THE SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCES OF LESBIANS IN SPORT**

BY

CAROLINE FUSCO

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of the University of Manitoba
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis research was to explore the experience of being a lesbian in sport through the stories of elite lesbian athletes. A radical feminist understanding of the institution of “compulsory heterosexuality” informs the discussion. This perspective contends that heterosexuality is legitimized and regulated in society through the dominant heterosexual culture. The institution of sport, a microcosm of society, contributes to the perpetuation of values that support “compulsory heterosexuality” and resists any affirmation or celebration of lesbian sexuality in sport. A review of literature indicated that there was an absence of empirical research in this area, however, there was acknowledgement in the existing literature that lesbian athletes confronted discrimination in sport. Feminist qualitative methodological principles directed the research process. Individual, in-depth interviews with eight lesbian athletes across a range of sports, were recorded and transcribed. Through systematic coding of the interview transcripts I identified themes and categories therein. Data analysis focused on: *what* lesbian experiences were in sport; the *strategies* they employed to deal with their experiences; how they made sense (understood) the sports world as a homophobic and heterosexist institution (*why* it all happens); and how they made sense of their individual lives within that sports world (the *consequences* to their lives). Thirty-three sub-categories emerged from coding within these domains; these sub-categories were then compared and assembled into the following six main conceptual categories: “Openness,” “Resistance,” “Tolerance,” “Uncertainties,” “Compromises” and “Defiance.” These conceptual categories interconnect to form categories of experiences that impact on the participants’ experiences as lesbian athletes in a sports environment that reproduces institutionalized “heteronormativity.” In conclusion, recommendations for future research with lesbians in sport, and visions for building a safe and affirming sports environment for lesbian athletes are presented.

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“Success is a journey, not a destination.”
(Unknown)

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

"Lesbians are woman-seers. When one is suspected of seeing women, one is summarily spat out of reality, through the cognitive gap and into the negative semantic space. If you ask what became of such a woman, you may be told she became a lesbian, and if you try to find out what a lesbian is, you will be told there is no such thing. But there is." (Marilyn Frye, 1983, p. 173)

The erasure of lesbians from history and present day social life has been achieved through the manipulation of our attention and reality by the dominant heterosexual culture (Frye, 1983). The maintenance of a patriarchal and heterosexual culture requires that women's attention be focused on men, re-orienting one's attention to woman-loving is antagonistic to the maintenance of a heterosexual reality. There have been many challenges to this, what Hennessy, 1993, describes as "heteronormativity." The movement has been away from analyzing sexuality as a personal or civil rights issue to now critique the 'normative' status of heterosexuality as a status that has been socially constructed. In North America lesbian and gay activists have lobbied for equal rights in all aspects of life. Feminists, and more recently postmodern lesbian and gay theorists, have not only demanded individual sexual freedom but continually challenge the regulation and organization of "heteronormativity." In this research I wanted to discover whether elite lesbian athletes were affected by "heteronormativity." I understand "heteronormativity" to be a concept or principle which organizes and regulates sexuality in society, a society in which heterosexuality is reified as the normal, standard, and acceptable sexuality.

The Culture of High Performance Sport

Competitive athletes are individuals with higher level skills who are seriously committed to their sport. They can belong to national and provincial organizations and are intensely involved in organized competitive sport. These athletes spend a significant amount of time training and developing their skills to prepare for higher levels of competition. Subsequently, as these athletes move into the high performance athletic ranks they spend more time on heavy training, skill, technical and tactical development and competitive success. It is most often the pursuit of excellence which is the motivating force behind the commitment of these athletes. Broom (1991), and Beamish and Borowy, 1988, (cited in Okano, 1993) found that many Canadian athletes at the elite level consider their role equal to that of full-time work. Okano also stated, "Canadian athletes at the height of their athletic career spend up to 40 hours a week training in their discipline (and) competition at the international level means long hours of travel to foreign countries to compete against the best in the world" (p.2). In addition athletes at the university and provincial level also spend many hours travelling across Canada to compete in national competitions. Although this lifestyle sounds exciting it involves a commitment to intense training, team schedules and many hours living with a small group of people, teammates and coaching staff. In spite of the resemblance to being a worker, athletes do not enjoy adequate protection. They do not have a union to represent their grievances so concerns such as wages, compensation, better working conditions, assistance in education, harassment and discrimination can often be overlooked.

In May 1992 the Minister's Task Force on Federal Sport Policy (Canada) released the report, Sport: The Way Ahead. This comprehensive document addressed the "purpose and place of sport in Canadian society, the values and ethics that should shape and underpin its future conduct, and the roles and responsibilities" of each stakeholder in Canadian sport (p.11). The report reinforced the widely held belief that sport was "a significant part of the social, cultural and recreational fabric of Canada." The Task Force identified the values that Canadians expect to guide sport in Canada, the most important of which is the focus on athletes and their needs.

As the core of the system, athletes must be supported in a holistic way - with care for the individuals growth and development, physical, moral, emotional and spiritual health. (p.57)

The "athlete-oriented system" ensures that athletes are secure in the knowledge that their rights are well defined, their health and safety is considered, their access to fair and meaningful participation and respect for the person is maintained. In addition they have a right to quality coaching and quality sports experience which are enshrined as essential characteristics in an athlete-oriented sport system. In providing a positive and just experience to athletes at all levels the Task Force recognized that issues such as "freedom of expression" and "freedom from harassment" were essential rights.

Although athletes are the core of the system, coaches and teammates play a key role in the athletes growth in sport. For instance, coaches are responsible for the quality of the athletes' sports experience. The Task Force stated:

Not only is their presence powerful, but their presence is constant. Athletes come in waves through the system but coaches are there wave after wave, providing instruction, direction, motivation, values and models. Athletes learn how to play games and in the

process they learn how to live life. The coach is a mentor and an educator in this process, often spending more time with the athlete than the athlete's own parents do. Good coaches develop great athletes. Good coaches nurture good people. Good coaches are good examples and instill great values. (p.65)

Two years before the Task Force released its recommendations, the National Conference on Coaching Strategies, 1990, developed and adopted value statements to guide the development of coaching in Canada. Like the Task Force they had a vision of athletes as the central focus of the Canadian sports system, coaching practice should be designed to meet their needs. In addition they strongly recommended that "every athlete (be) entitled to a qualified and certified coach (p. 66)." Their philosophy included a statement on equal access for all coaches:

Equal opportunity is a cornerstone of coaching in Canada. All individuals , regardless of gender, race, age, ability status, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, or geographic region, should have opportunities to become coaches. (cited in Task Force report, pp. 66-67)

This "sport for all" concept is based on values of equity and access, however, the Task Force Report, 1992, stated that "the current reality in Canadian sport is that many individuals face significant barriers to participation in sport" and that "the sport system does not include all Canadians" (p.147). The chapter on "Equity and Access" included issues which looked at the experience of women, Indigenous people, Canadians with a disability and ethnic and visible minorities in sport. It is interesting to note that despite the visions that the Task Force reported in Sport: The Way Ahead, the equity and access chapter did not include a reference to the barriers that lesbians (or gay men) face while participating in sport. The issues that were addressed in "Equity and Access" are in line with official government policies on equity issues. Although there is no reason given for the omission of

addressing barriers that lesbians and gay men confront in sport, I would surmise that the silence surrounding the presence of lesbians and gay men in sport contributes to the absence of addressing these issues in this report. However, the principle behind “sport for all” is the concept of inclusiveness, does this inclusiveness not entail lesbians (or gay men)? In this thesis I will show that the sports world is a long way from including or affirming lesbian athletes.

Lorde (1984) defines heterosexism as “the belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving and thereby its right to dominance,” and homophobia as “the fear of feelings of love for member’s of one’s own sex and therefore the hatred of those feeling in others” (p. 45). Heterosexism and homophobia in women’s sports have only been addressed publicly in the last decade. Previously, individuals had written about women’s sport but had avoided the lesbian issue (Woods & Harbeck, 1992). Bennett (cited in Nelson, 1991) labeled this avoidance of addressing lesbianism in women’s sport “a silence so loud it screams” (p. 139). Although lesbians have not been overtly denied access to participation in sports or active living, the heterosexual image of women in sports persists and is encouraged. The lesbian label is still used to intimidate lesbians and undermine attempts by all women to challenge constructed gender relations in sport. Griffin (cited in Nelson, 1991) states:

Women’s athletics is, in fact, held hostage to fear of the “L-word.” As long as women’s athletics continues to deny that there are lesbians in sport [...] we will never control our sporting lives and will be forced to waste energy defending a counterfeit heterosexual-only image that we all know is a lie. (p. 142)

The Women’s Sport Foundation (WSF), the Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation (CAHPER), the American Alliance for

Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD) and the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women in Sport (CAAWS) have provided sessions on homophobia at their annual conferences. The issue of concern has been that homophobic harassment results in the invisibility, silencing, rejection and isolation of the lesbian athlete (Griffin, 1989; Griffin & Genasci, 1990; Lenskyj, 1987, 1990, 1991). Lenskyj (1991) documented the responses of these national sports organizations; (1) in 1983 WSF conference participants produced a "resolution in support of lesbians" (p. 66); (2) in 1985 and 1986 CAAWS recommended that it would "endorse the inclusion of sexual orientation in the Canadian Human Rights Charter," and was "opposed to discrimination against lesbians in sport and physical activity" (pp. 65-66), and would support advocacy efforts to ensure lesbian rights; (3) in 1987 and 1989 AAHPERD sessions on research on homophobia received very positive responses; and (4) in 1988 CAHPER resolved that "homophobia be recognized as an equity issue in physical education and that opportunities to discuss the ramifications of homophobia in physical education be promoted" (p. 67). Lenskyj (1987) also illustrated, however, that there was often difficulty in women's sports organizations to resolve heterosexist and homophobic issues. Although organizations had passed resolutions in support of lesbians representing a move toward effective solidarity between all members, homophobia often remained a pervasive concern. She stated:

It had been suggested that CAAWS lost many "good women" when lesbians became more visible and vocal, [...] no one suggested that "good women" were also lost when the organization failed to confront the homophobia problem. (p. 384)

A more recent article in USA Today (June, 1993) entitled "Gays in sport: Still in the shadows," suggests that sexuality issues are still a "hot topic" within

sports (Brady, 1993, p. 2B). But the attitude in sports remains, like the United States military, “don’t ask, don’t tell” (p. 1B). The message constantly made apparent is that it is frowned upon to be gay in sports and this is manifested by the use of language and behaviour in sports that is both homophobic and heterosexist (Brady, 1993). Bull (1995) states that homophobia retains a strangle hold on pro sports. Meisel (cited in Bull, 1995) suggests:

It’s (sport) the last arena where homosexuality is not acceptable, and there is no evidence at all that the situation is changing. [...]. People seem to have accepted the sports closet as inevitable. (p. 29)

In reality there is virtually no support for athletes to ‘come out’ in sports and the sports world “shows little interest in making ‘coming out’ easier for gay athletes” (Bull, 1995, p. 30). To illustrate this point Bull cites a sport consultant who insists that lesbian and gay athletes have “no business even discussing their sexual orientation publicly.”

Sexuality and sexual preference are not anyone’s business [...] whoever makes it a public or political issue is wrong. There is nothing professional sports teams can do with it. It’s not something that I would ever raise with a team. I take issue with anyone who tries to make it an issue. (p. 30)

We know that lesbians participate in sport but professionally very few lesbians are explicitly “out.” Martina Navratilova, in women’s tennis, is one of the most notably lesbian athletes to “come out.” Recently in OUT (1994) she acknowledged that she has not “emboldened” other athletes to come out. She remarks that she has been “out” since 1980 and has “never noticed a line forming behind me” (p. 94). The reason why a line has not formed behind her is because it is still better for lesbians, especially in professional sport “to be seen, not heard”

(Reed, 1994). When interviewing a young lesbian golf pro, Reed asked why the need for the silence?

Because it would be suicide. Because you'd get cut off from every endorsement opportunity possible. Because there's money and careers at stake. [...]. There was a mandatory players meeting once, one of the top players, a dyke, led the meeting. She told us, "Ladies, we do not care what goes on inside your bedroom door. But keep it there." The message was loud and clear: For the women's golf tour to succeed, we need to rid ourselves of the lesbian stigma. (p. 92)

The "institution of compulsory heterosexuality" described by Rich (1986) has been identified as the cause of discrimination which impacts on the lives of lesbian athletes and leaves them isolated, denying their emotional lives and retreating into sameness (Baxter, 1983; Kidd, 1983; Lenskyj, 1990). The maintenance of heterosexual attractiveness in women's sport is an example of this acquiescence to patriarchal and heterosexual hegemony and homophobia. Due to heterosexism and homophobia the lesbian's athletic career, depends on her passing as a heterosexual woman for fear of personal safety and exploitation.

A lesbian, closeted in her job because of heterosexist prejudice, is not simply forced into denying the truth of her outside relationship or private life. Her job depends on her pretending to be not merely heterosexual, but a heterosexual woman in terms of dressing and playing the feminine, deferential role required of a "real" woman (Rich, 1986, pp. 41-42) [emphasis in original text]

"Compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich, 1986) is maintained by the concepts of heterosexism and homophobia which are actively reproduced in society in order to maintain "heteronormativity" (Hennessy, 1993). For a woman to be both athletic and lesbian is the antithesis of the constructed traditionally passive feminine role, in addition, the underlying assumption that society is inherently heterosexual denies and erases lesbian existence. This denial and erasure pervades sport, therefore, a

lesbian athlete who is interested in pursuing a sports career through an organized national, provincial or varsity programme does so within a sports system in which she is often forced to remain silent about her sexuality and one in which her reality is often excluded.

Research Purpose

There has been concern has been voiced about the lack of inquiry which specifically addresses the subjective experiences of lesbian athletes who are constrained to remain invisible (Brown, 1991; Griffin, 1987; Nelson, 1991). In this thesis I give a small sample of lesbian athletes the opportunity to tell their stories about their experiences in sport, and explore whether homophobia in sport affected their lives. Because of "compulsory heterosexuality" there has been a paucity of research investigating the experiences of lesbians in sport (Griffin, 1987). The issue has either been neglected, or focuses on the effect of the stigma of the lesbian label on all women athletes. However, lesbians are doubly stigmatized in sport both as women and lesbians (Hargreaves, 1990), therefore, I believe lesbians provide a unique perspective on how they participate in the 'compulsory' heterosexual world of sport. The lesbian athletes' accounts provide insight into the issues and concerns which they confronted in the institution of sport. I have formulated the following research questions to guide this exploratory research: (1) What are lesbian athletes experiences in sports? (2) Do lesbians develop strategies to cope with their experiences? (3) How do lesbian athletes make sense of (explain) their experiences in sport? The research focus is on a radical feminist critique of the social construction of lesbian sexuality which has been defined as being 'outside the norm' of heterosexuality, a norm which I theorize is maintained by heterosexism.

Frye (1991) suggests that the language of science, rooted in male definitions contributes to the exclusion and trivialization of the lesbian as “no linguistic community, no language and, therefore, in one important sense, no knowledge [...] keeps our (lesbian) experience from being fully formed and articulate” (p. 6). In the research each participant had the opportunity to create their own vocabulary and meanings from their lives through in-depth interviews, and they were valued as agents of knowledge in the research process (Frye, 1983; Harding, 1987; Kirby, 1991). Feminist researchers have critiqued traditional epistemologies which have systematically excluded women as agents of knowledge and the lack of recognition that societal definitions and social context inform women’s subjective realities (Harding, 1987; Millman & Kanter, 1987, Morgan, 1983). Therefore, I used a feminist methodological approach to explore the subjective experiences of lesbians in sport. Lenskyj (1990) stresses the importance of women-centered research in sport, the goal of which is women’s empowerment through acknowledging women’s location and marginalization in the broader social context. She suggests that women should be collaborators in the research process creating knowledge from their own marginal perspectives and reporting the quality of their own experiences. This research was grounded in the personal experiences and socio-historical context in which the lesbian athletes located themselves.

Assumptions

Kirby and McKenna (1989) define “conceptual baggage” as a “record of your thoughts and ideas about the research question at the beginning and throughout the research process” (p. 32). This process encouraged me to explore

my personal assumptions and became a disciplined part of my recording of the process and content of this research.

I suspected that lesbians in sport attempt to pass and/or are actively encouraged to pass as heterosexual and this serves to perpetuate the silence and invisibility of their existence thus maintaining heterosexist norms. I believed that lesbians in sport developed strategies to cope with heterosexism, homophobia and internalized homophobia; that this process is on-going in all aspects of their lives and can affect their self-identity and self-image. I felt that age, experience, comfort with lesbian identity, level of competition and the composition of the team (in terms of number of lesbians or heterosexual women playing on the team) would influence these coping strategies. These themes have also been advanced in the radical feminist literature examining lesbian oppression in sport (e.g., Lenskyj, 1991).

Delimitations

The study was limited to lesbian athletes who participated in team sports at an inter-varsity or elite level of competition. I assumed that their experience would be different to lesbians involved in recreational athletics. The sample was a purposive one, limited to lesbian athletes who played on teams which were not all lesbian. My assumption was that this experience would be unique in comparison with lesbian athletes who play on all lesbian teams. This premise is supported in the literature:

It's a nicer feeling somehow [...] maybe because there seems to be more of an openness or more of an acceptance, where you can just say anything that you ever want to say [...] somebody will understand, whereas on, you know, a team with straight people on it [...] sometimes you just can't say some things you want to say (Bredemeier et al., 1991, p. 100)

It was this essential difference that I wanted to explore.

The support that I could provide to the athletes was limited to “listening” to their stories, this may have impacted on their confidence and willingness to either continue as a participant in the study or reconstruct really painful experiences.

Relevance of Research

Given the relative absence of research documenting lesbian experiences in sport, the goal of this study was to contribute to the literature in the area of lesbian sexuality in women’s sport. In conducting this research I wanted to have an impact on the issues concerning lesbian athletes.

Although feminist scholarship has produced substantial women-centered research in the last decade only a small proportion of this research directly addresses lesbian issues in sport. The institution of sport symbolically contributes to and perpetuates patriarchal culture. In addition, there is a resistance to feminist scholarship, the claim is that feminism is merely a political activity and is devoid of objectivity. Hall (1990) assures us that feminist scholarship *is* (italics added) political. She indicated that through the linking of theory and praxis feminism looks beyond a description of social realities to changing the way we live our lives, it “*is an emancipatory theory*” (p. 234). The interdisciplinary nature of my study which combined feminist theory, methodologies and sport sociology contributes to a new direction in exploring women’s experiences in sport and recognizes the potential that sport provides to criticize and deconstruct hegemonic structures in our society. Hall also indicates that “there is no need to apologize for this intentionally woman-centered focus; it must continue” (1990, p. 236).

Documentation of the findings will be used to better inform the sports community about the nature of the current discrimination against lesbian athletes. There have been some empirical studies with lesbians in sport, especially in physical education. To date, however, I am not aware of any study in Canada that specifically explores the experiences of lesbian athletes. Other theoretical studies have addressed lesbian issues in sport. Some have challenged the inadequacies of the sports literature and critique the institution of sport from a feminist perspective, identifying patriarchal and heterosexual hegemony as powerful constraints on women's lives and sexuality (Bennett et al., 1987; Lenskyj, 1987, 1990, 1991). Other studies have used anecdotal information and collective vignettes to highlight lesbian experiences (Baxter, 1983; Kidd, 1983; Griffin, 1989). It is essential to note that these studies have provided a pioneering step towards giving lesbian athletes a voice and making their existence in sports visible. Society, in general, is antagonistic towards lesbians, therefore, there is always a risk present for researchers working with lesbian issues. Due to the ground-breaking work and the discourse these studies have provided, I was able to do this research.

In the following chapter I review literature which; (1) documents the experiences of lesbian athletes and which highlights why homophobia persists in the institution of sport; (2) demonstrates that lesbian athletes can be empowered through sport; and which (3) deconstructs the institution of heterosexuality as socially constructed.

In the third chapter I review the methodological design which best suited the focus of this research, the participants who took part in the research, the research process and how I organized the data for analysis.

In the fourth chapter I present the research findings which document the participants experiences in sport.

In the fifth chapter I describe how the athletes and I interpret the sports world and their lives within that context. In addition, I describe the categories which emerged form their accounts, illustrating the connections between their experiences and relevant radical feminist deconstructions of heterosexism and homophobia.

In the concluding chapter, I address areas which may need further exploration, present visions for the future of lesbians in sport, and discuss the implications of the present research.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

“The image of the sick, masculine lesbian sexual predator and her association with athleticism persists in the late 20th century. The power of this image to control and intimidate women is as strong today as it was 60 years ago.” (Pat Griffin, 1992a, p. 252)

Lesbians and Sport - Barriers to Participation

Historically, it has been suggested that homophobia and heterosexism operate in sport to silence lesbians. This silence contributes to the divisions among women in sport, perpetuates lies about the meaning of being lesbian and functions to keep women’s attention on heterosexual reality. Homophobia serves as an effective social constraint in women’s sport, it denies the reality of lesbians and maintains appropriate gender role behaviours (Griffin, 1989). In essence the label “lesbian” has been used effectively to control women in sport. Nelson (cited in Brown, 1991) notes:

The strategy has to pretend we are not gay, and none among us is gay, we tend to bend over backward with make-up trying to prove our femininity because that “proves” being straight [...] “passing” has never helped a minority group [...] it doesn’t help self-esteem, nor does it help public acceptance. (p. 6)

Studies emerging in the last decade in the discipline of sports sociology with feminist perspectives began to open the “closet door” and critique that the fear of lesbians in sport was directly related to men’s need to control women’s sexuality (Lenskyj, 1983). In an article entitled “Why men fear women’s teams,” Rounds (1991) interviewed American sportswomen, players and administrators. These women talked about men’s concerns over women’s involvement in team sports. Lopino (a softball hall-of-famer) stated that “sport is a place where physiological

advantages give men power, and they're afraid of losing it, sports is the last great bastion of male chauvinism" (p. 44). Similarly Vivas (ex-director of major league volleyball) stated that "women athletes are looked at as masculine and get the stigma of being gay" and that the "United States in general has problems dealing with women athletes and strong aggressive females" (p. 43). This theory is reinforced by the following quote:

You know what killed sports? Lesbians. This cost us in women's basketball. But I know there are not as many lesbians now unless I'm really blinded. We discourage it, you know. We put it under wraps. (Former basketball promoter, quoted in Rounds, 1991, p. 43)

Attitudes such as those expressed by the basketball promoter inadvertently legitimize the notion that lesbians can ruin sports, while at the same time they prescribe maintaining the facade of heterosexuality.

MacKinnon (1987) identifies that accusations of being a lesbian in sport are "directly related to the sense that women athletes have of body as self, as acting as opposed to body as something that conveys sexual accessibility to men, as there to be acted upon," and she further adds that it is "threatening to one's takeability, one's rapeability, one's femininity, to be strong and physically self-possessed" (p. 122). Historically, therefore, society has viewed the presence of lesbians in sport (and in society in general) as problematic and threatening because lesbian existence is considered antithetical to normative definitions of femininity and heterosexuality. Kyvallos (cited in Reed, 1994) stated:

If you are a confident athlete, men are threatened. If you are a confident lesbian athlete, they're even more threatened. The men who control sports would prefer that women were not gay. If they are, they want them to stay in the closet. That way, I think, in their heads they think they can still ____ (sic) them. (p.92)

As women have gained more power and prominence in sport, homophobia has flourished. To appreciate the power of homophobia in sport it is important to acknowledge the historical belief that sport is a male preserve. Historically, sport has been a male domain, athleticism has been equated with masculinity (Willis, 1982; Birrell, 1988). Feminists have developed a critique of sport which demonstrates that the institution of sport is an arena in which masculine hegemony is constructed and reconstructed to naturalize men's power over women (Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983; Bryson, 1987; Hall, 1988; Lenskyj, 1983, 1987, 1991). Throughout history sporting participation was deemed inappropriate with women's traditional role. So-called "cross-sex behaviours," such as athleticism among women, were posited to be indicators of emotional disturbance or sexual deviation (Spence, Deaux & Helmreich, 1985) and sport was thought to masculinize women (Colker & Spatz-Widom, 1980; Myers & Lips, 1978; Wrisberg, Draper & Everett, 1988). There appeared to be an obsession with the potential loss of femininity in female athletes and an implicit suggestion that a woman has to be something other than feminine to be interested and successful in sports. The reification of the results from these studies reaffirmed societal and patriarchal beliefs that sports were, primarily, a masculine validating experience (Boutilier & SanGiovanni, 1983). Consequently, the exclusion of women from sport was justified through the legitimizing of this patriarchal myth and, in addition, through promoting the notion that sport conflicted with women's femininity (Hall, 1988). This lead to the labelling of women in sport as "heterosexually problematic" (MacKinnon, 1987, p. 122). Theorists suggest that in reality the 'femininity' reported in traditional studies of women in sport was a disguised word for 'heterosexuality,' and that the attention

focused on woman athlete's femininity manifested the explicit and implicit fear that she may be lesbian (Hall, 1988; Lenskyj, 1986; MacKinnon, 1987).

Women's colleges and sports teams were assumed to be places where mannish lesbians lurked. Women in sport and physical education especially fit the profile of women to watch out for: they were in groups without men, they were not engaged in activities thought to enhance their abilities to be good wives and mothers, and they were being physically active in sport, a male activity. (Griffin, 1992a, p. 252)

As men have considered sports their private domain any challenges by women against the inequities, or questioning who holds power and controls economic resources in sport has been met with the "lesbian" accusation. Subsequently, the oppression of lesbians is actively reproduced in order that the dominant group, predominantly male, white and heterosexual, can enjoy its privilege and power (Griffin, 1989). These scare tactics are used to silence women into submission. Sabo (cited in Nelson, 1991) suggests:

Homophobia doesn't pertain to genitals but to jobs. It doesn't pertain to preference as it does to opportunity. Homophobia in sports perpetuates male dominance and the male monopoly of existing resources. (p. 145)

This is reflected in the fact that, in professional women's athletics, corporate sponsors often threaten to withdraw financial support from sports events and conferences if there is any acknowledgment of lesbianism. Lesbian athletes remain silent to protect their earnings and many of the contracts with sports agents and corporate sponsors "include a 'moral clause' forbidding 'conduct unbecoming a professional' or any behaviour bringing disrepute or bad publicity" (Nelson, 1991, p. 139). These clauses are used against lesbians. Martina Navratilova acknowledges that her sexuality has been the reason why companies thought her too controversial for sponsorship. The repercussion of being an explicitly "out"

lesbian for her has been the financial loss of millions of dollars in endorsements. Financial concerns will undoubtedly influence both professional and amateur national, provincial and varsity athletes' openness about their sexuality. The limited opportunity for women at this level and the emphasis on success interrelated with scholarships and funding fosters an environment for sexual and homophobic harassment of lesbian athletes (Lenskyj, 1992).

There have been several studies to show how homophobia in women's sport disempowers women athletes (both lesbian and heterosexual) (Birrell, 1988; Blinde & Taub, 1992; Guthrie, 1982). The opportunity to highlight how homophobia and heterosexism directly affected *lesbian* athletes was advanced by researchers who reported evidence from interviews with only lesbians in sport. In 1983, Baxter, Goldstein and Kidd directly and independently addressed the concerns of lesbian athletes in sport. Goldstein (1983) in her article "Women striving: Pursuing the physical challenge" interviewed two lesbian athletes. Goldstein highlights the passion that the women had in the pursuit of their sport and their desire to maintain an active and competitive sporting life. Concurrent with their positive experiences in sport, Goldstein reports how being lesbian affected their sports participation. Both interviewees indicated that women's sport was paranoid about the implications of lesbian labelling and both reflected how they had been hurt and hushed about being a lesbian. Carmen, a 27 year old track and field athlete stated

Once people find out you're gay it's almost as if you have a disease. You're not an athlete any longer; you're a diseased person. So, I didn't want to hinder my performance. So I'd have to be silent. (p. 79)

Goldstein advanced the view that much work needed to be carried out to counter the ignorance and fear which surrounded the issue of lesbianism in sport.

Likewise Kidd (1983) in "Getting physical: Compulsory heterosexuality and sport" stated that lesbians had to deal with many attacks concerning their sexual orientation. Lesbians endured "whisper campaigns," they were "ostracized on teams," and were forced to "listen to homophobic remarks," and "impose self-censorship" (pp. 64-65). Kidd also highlighted that individuals in the sports institution hide behind homophobia, rather than directly confront their biases and assumptions about lesbians.

Baxter (1983) illustrated that lesbians in sport were rarely candid about their sexuality. In "Lesbians and sport: The dilemma of coming out," she recounted vignettes from a personal survey she conducted. The lesbian athletes positively valued the confidence they developed in their bodies and the bonding and security of being part of a team. However, it was revealed that "to be a lesbian in sport is not all confidence and power and self-celebration, an equal part of life is self-denial, secrecy and coded messages" (p. 19). Birrell and Richter (1987) also concluded that "intercollegiate sport was very alienating," and "was not a safe place to be a lesbian" (p. 406).

In addition to the work done by Goldstein, Kidd and Baxter in the early 1980's more recent evidence has highlighted that lesbians in sport confront silence and discrimination and are targets of sexual harassment (Griffin, 1989, 1992a, 1992b; Lenskyj, 1991, 1992). Moreover, lesbians have been forced to quit their jobs or abandon hopes of an athletic career or attempt to hide their sexual orientation

for fear of being ostracized (Baxter, 1987; MacIntosh & Whitson, 1990; Lenskyj, 1992). Griffin (cited in Nelson, 1991) states that:

Hate, fear, and discrimination are the problem. Denial has not been effective. Secrecy-particularly in combination with oppression - leads to shame. As long as women refuse to acknowledge the presence of lesbians, the accusation "Dyke!" will remain potent. (p. 148)

Recently Griffin (1989), Griffin and Genasci (1990), Rotella and Murray (1991) have illustrated the various ranges of homophobic behaviour and it's effects on the lesbian or gay male sports participants. Fear, ignorance, silence, isolation, violence and psychological stress are associated with the 'homosexual' existence in sport. Griffin (1989), Griffin and Genasci (1990) were concerned with the perpetuation of homosexual oppression throughout the institution of physical education. Their goal is to strive for open communication with individuals taking the responsibility to confront heterosexist and homophobic attitudes. Griffin presented resolutions to promote equity in sports. These resolutions challenge individuals to identify, for themselves, their internal stereotypical myths surrounding their understanding of sexual orientation, and to establish a safer environment for 'homosexual' athletes. In addition to these resolutions, Griffin and Genasci include suggestions for individuals striving to do research in the area of heterosexism and homophobia in sports and physical education. They argue that researchers should ask questions concerning their own beliefs, sexual orientation, knowledge, ideology and the impact they will have on research with 'homosexual' topics.

Rotella and Murray (1991) in their article "Homophobia, the world of sport, and sports psychology consulting" suggest that homophobia interferes with the

athletes ability to reach her or his potential in sport. They were concerned with the pursuit of excellence and success in sport. Evidence of this was illustrated in the words of a female collegiate basketball player they interviewed:

Teams have turned on each other because of homophobia. Players have transferred from schools because they could not handle the label of being on a "gay" team. I have wondered about teams that show so much talent on paper but not on the court or field. Did the issue of homophobia prevent them from playing up to their full potential? (p. 358)

The ramifications of homophobia and the effects it has on all those involved in sports, athletes, parents, coaches, administrators and those involved in enhancing sports performance such as sports psychologists, were well illustrated by Rotella and Murray (1991). They identified examples of homophobia from individual recollections which indicated that homophobia is damaging, irrational and detrimental to the healthy development of 'homosexuals' and heterosexuals. A philosophy for effective sports psychology consulting was proposed which involved the recognition that discrimination against 'homosexual' exists in sports. A wish list for the future was proposed and the adoption of these recommendations was seen as a step to initiate the gradual elimination of the negative effects of homophobia in the sports world.

In addition there have been sessions organized at many academic conferences in which the heterosexist and homophobic nature of sports are discussed. Despite these Lenskyj (1991) suggests that the issue of homophobia remains a pervasive concern and that the institutions of sport create a negative environment within which lesbian athletes participate. Heterosexism and homophobia are pervasive within sport and this is demonstrated by the persistent lack of tolerance for sexual diversity within its community. Sports associations and

governing bodies rarely address or acknowledge the existence of lesbian athletes, resulting in the invisibility of lesbians. There seems to be an unwritten yet understood agreement among associations, governing bodies and athletes to avoid direct discussion on lesbian issues (Peper, 1994). If lesbianism in sport is mentioned it is rarely valorized.

It is not surprising then that, proportionately, a relatively small number of lesbians are "out" in sports. Griffin (1992a) stated that there are at least six manifestations of homophobia in women's sports; (1) silence, (2) denial, (3) apology, (4) promotion of a heterosex image, (5) attacks on lesbians, and (6) preferences for male coaches. These manifestations have the "effect of making many heterosexual (and lesbian) women feel obligated to prove their femininity and heterosexuality at every opportunity in order to dissociate themselves from both the lesbian label and lesbians in sport" (Lenskyj, 1988, p. 57). It has been suggested that fear and tension that exists between lesbians and heterosexual women in sport (Griffin, 1992a). Lesbians have been ostracized and ridiculed by heterosexual sportswomen who are defensive about lesbian stereotypes and paranoid about being labelled lesbian. Recent evidence supports the fact that this paranoia still continues within women's sports circles today (Reed, 1994). Heterosexual women remain divided in their support for lesbians. On one hand sport is an arena where all women can exercise the right to be aware of their own physicality, in contrast the stigma of being labelled lesbian creates fear, ambivalence and indifferent attitudes towards lesbians (Griffin, 1992a). This is reflected in Vivian Stringer's (a head basketball coach at Iowa university) statement:

It's a terrible thing to say, just because you're not married you're gay. Or just because you're married you're not gay. It's a sick

thing. I don't go out of my way to find out. I don't want to know. I do take offense to someone suggesting, "so many of them are gay anyway." Wow! I don't want anything negative associated with my profession. But it's really none of my business. (Nelson, 1991, p. 168)

Allegations of lesbianism serve to divide women. It prevents solidarity in women's sport at the promotional, organizational and participation level (Lenskyj, 1983).

Lesbians and Sport - Empowerment through Sport

Reflecting on this literature the question which constantly arises for me is, what do lesbians gain through their sports experience which encourages their continued participation. Considering the hurtful effects of heterosexism and homophobia documented in the literature it is difficult to comprehend why lesbians continue to play within the sports institution.

The number of lesbians participating in sports has never been calculated. This would be an arduous task as so many lesbians are terrified of coming out (Brown, 1991). Nevertheless, it has been suggested that there are more lesbians involved in sport and physical education than might be expected by the estimated distribution of lesbians in the general population (Bennet et al., 1987; Palzkill, 1990). Assessing this figure is difficult but it does support the myth that there are a large number of lesbians in sports. Pronger (1990) recounts conversations with lesbians who feared that they might not meet any other lesbians once they stopped participating in sports. It seems ironic then that despite the insidious discrimination which exists in sports against lesbians, that they continue to enter the sports world.

Griffin (cited in Nelson, 1991) states:

Lesbians are not stupid. They know to go where there are other lesbians. Sports arenas have been the place where there are women who are striving to be strong and independent. (p. 146)

Through sport lesbians can develop knowledge and an intimate awareness of their own bodies. It can promote competence, empowerment and assist in identifying their own physical self (Baxter, 1983). It might be construed that sports are considered a refuge by some lesbian athletes.

This 'refuge' concept was examined by Palzkill (1990). She suggests that developing a lesbian existence would dissolve the internal conflicts which some women may experience as a result of participating in sports. Palzkill's article titled "Between gymshoes and high heels-the development of a lesbian identity and existence in top class sport," examines the experiences of lesbian athletes who exist in a sports environment that celebrates male values and norms, such as strength, aggression, masculinity and dominance. She interviewed 19 athletes who have competed for West Germany either in individual or team sports. She suggests that sports have been defined by men in order to validate male experiences and exclude women, and that this is perpetuated through the reproduction of gender roles which results in certain sports being labelled "inappropriate" for women. The accounts of the athletes support this notion of gender non-conformity. One athlete recounts that "I didn't move in a feminine way, well simply because I moved in a very powerful way" (p. 223). Palzkill identifies that as these athletes move from childhood to puberty their athleticism becomes less tolerated, and the resulting conflict isolates them from previous childhood groups and others who expect them to conform to conventional gender roles. She advocates that the sports institution offers a place of refuge from the isolation that women may experience outside that social system. Sport then can legitimize the physical development of women. This is supported by one athlete's statement:

It (sport) was an opportunity for me to exert myself and sweat, and I don't know, that was o.k [...] everyone on all sides approved of athletics, really doing sport, within a given framework. (Palzkill, 1990, p. 224)

Sport created a space for women to empower themselves and feel less isolated, however, it is difficult to believe that sport is truly a safe and free space for women. Palzkill supports this notion too, suggesting that sport denies women's sexuality. The athletes talked about feeling "in-between genders," and the contradictions they confronted as they attempted to meet the demands of the traditional female role and being a sportswoman. Palzkill infers that sportswomen have developed strategies to overcome this identity crisis. They may choose to leave sport, ignore their sexuality or attempt to have a heterosexual relationship to confirm their conformity to societal norms. This is similar to themes articulated by Griffin and Genasci (1990) and Lenskyj (1988), who suggest that heterosexual sportswomen attempt to, or are forced to constantly prove their femininity and heterosexuality in sport.

As stated earlier Palzkill (1990) advocates the development of a lesbian identity to overcome these conflicts. This is contradictory to previous discourse dealing with sportswomen which advanced the notion that women involved in sports should attempt to remain feminine at all costs (Rohrbaugh, 1983). As suggested previously this 'feminine' was a disguised word for heterosexuality (Hall, 1988). Palzkill states:

If, however, a girl does get involved in a relationship to [sic] another woman [...] then this has a profound effect upon her experience and definition of being a woman [...]. 'Womanhood' in this autonomous definition is no longer, as in the female sex role, in conflict with the self and with personal autonomy and freedom. (p. 227)

All lesbians in the study confirmed that their attitudes toward their own womanhood changed dramatically with the beginning of a lesbian relationship as their worthiness as women was reflected in their partners. One woman states "there (as a lesbian) I've felt really good as a woman for years and years. And really enjoyed it, it's really great to be a woman" (p. 228). In concluding Palzkill (1990) does recognize that being a lesbian in sport does have fearful implications because a lesbian existence defies conventional female roles. She concludes that lesbians are silenced, sanctioned, denigrated and made invisible. This is consistent with the literature reported earlier which illustrates the systematic harassment of lesbian athletes throughout the sports institution (Baxter, 1983; Griffin, 1989; Lenskyj, 1986, 1987, 1991). Palzkill (1990) proposes that unity among sportswomen is required to develop a culture for all women in sport and again this is a consistent theme throughout the literature on lesbians in sport. This was a pioneering study attempting to incorporate theory and the subjective experiences of lesbian athletes. In concluding this section the words of a lesbian softball player indicate the significance of her participation in sport.

I think there's an image. I think we have sort of, as a lesbian team, an historically lesbian team, a social responsibility to put out a team to represent the gay world and athletes. [...]. I think it's really important - not only for lesbians who come to watch us who aren't athletic or don't play - to enjoy that and be proud of that because I know the player's are, but it is important for straight people to see that these are fun, kind women who are talented and lesbian.
(Bredemeier et al., 1991, p. 100)

Despite the ramifications of existing as a lesbian athlete sport may act as a environment in which lesbians can celebrate their physicality, and for certain athletes it becomes a refuge from society. However, for other lesbian athletes their experiences in sport may also be reflective of their existence outside the institution

of sport in a society that uses homophobia to strenuously defend heterosexuality as the only viable form of expression of emotional and sexual commitment (Frye, 1983; Rich, 1986).

Theoretical Perspective

In this section I will illustrate and describe the phenomenon of heterosexism and homophobia, and how these phenomenon have been theorized as social constructions. These constructions represent the cultural norms of what is considered appropriate sexuality and sexual expression in our society. Lesbians, historically, have been categorized as sexual deviants and because of this lesbians confront discrimination and are ostracized in mainstream society. The implication for lesbians in sport is that their existence is covered up and their direct experience is rarely addressed. I will illustrate that the institution of sport is definitely not post-oppression but rather that sport is influenced by the state of society and reflects that society. The social relations which take place in sport are expressed and advanced by the relations that have been historically developed and reproduced in society (Mackenzie-Dewar, 1991). Sport is an institution where social values, such as power and privilege, are negotiated and I envisaged that the social relations that result in discrimination against lesbians in sport would be merely a reflection of the systemic intolerance of ‘homosexuality’ in society. The institution of sport is a microcosm of society and contributes to the perpetuation of values that sustain “heteronormativity.” Sport is “a dynamic social space where dominant ideologies are perpetuated” (Messner, 1988, p. 198), and lesbians in sport do not escape the overt or covert discrimination which reflects the systemic intolerance of differing sexuality’s in our patriarchal culture.

Cultural norms legitimized in our society are constantly reinforced until the values are experienced as reality. This inculcation of dominant values is pervasive and results in a “hegemonic order” which Whitson (1984) identifies as an “official system of meanings and values operating at the level of feeling as well as thought, in terms of which existing ways of doing things are experienced as sensible and right” (p. 68). Heterosexuality, as the only acceptable form of expression of emotional and sexual commitment, is legitimized and regulated in our society by the dominant patriarchal and heterosexual culture (Frye, 1983; Rich, 1986).

Heterosexuality is assumed to be natural and right. It is understood to “*be sexuality*” (Frye, 1992, p. 55, italics in original). Generally, it is not perceived as a choice, it is natural. Pressure to be heterosexual is reflected in the idealization of heterosexual romance in art, literature, media and advertising (Rich, 1986). This pressure is systemic yet it’s ‘compulsory’ nature is completely denied by the dominant heterosexual culture. However, those who do not conform to the norm of heterosexuality are pressured to remain invisible and are excluded from sharing the “norms” privileges. Pharr describes the “*defined norm*” (italics in text) as “a standard of rightness and often righteousness wherein all other are judged in relation to it” (p. 53). There is an attempt then by our patriarchal culture to limit, control and invalidate those who are outside the “norm” of heterosexuality.

A radical feminist framework critiques heterosexuality as a category which is socially constructed to maintain the exploitation of women as a class (Frye, 1983). The “hetersystem” (Durocher, 1991) has defined, limited and conditioned the expression of sexuality in our society and has resulted in what Rich (1986) identified as “the institution of compulsory heterosexuality” (p. 24). This has been

imposed on women and has established the appropriation, the access and the attention of women for men. Frye (1983) suggests that lesbianism is “presumed to be some sort of affliction, or is a result of failed attempts to solve some sort of problem or resolve some sort of conflict (and if she could find another way, she would take it, and then not be a lesbian)” (p. 159). Those who choose an alternative sexuality to what is accepted are marginalized by society’s normative values as traditionally “female sexuality is equated with and defined as availability to be taken by a man” (MacKinnon, 1987, p. 122). To reject this accessibility threatens the maintenance of male control in our society (MacKinnon, 1987). There is an attempt then by dominant groups (mostly male, heterosexual and white) in society to maintain the invisibility of lesbian reality.

This analysis of “compulsory heterosexuality” and the “heterosystem” which describes the organization and regulation of sexuality in society, is being pushed further by postmodern queer theorists. They are exploring and deconstructing the meanings of heterosexualized gender relations and the multiple positions of lesbian and gay sexual identities. With both radical feminists and postmodern theorists there is an tacit knowledge that the oppressive structures of “compulsory heterosexuality,” the “heterosystem” and “heteronormativity” are maintained by the concepts of sexism, heterosexism and homophobia and the categories of “lesbian” and “heterosexual.”

Being a woman in our society one can be subjected to sexist oppression. Although *all* women may be affected by oppression, lesbians are not just like heterosexual women but are subjected to specific oppressions and are further marginalized (Kitzinger, 1987), as are many other women who face multiple

oppressions because of systemic racism, ageism, and ableism. To be lesbian then is to be doubly oppressed in a sexist and heterosexist society. Lesbian existence is denigrated in our society because it is a rejection of compulsory norms and directly or indirectly denies male access to women's sexuality (Rich, 1986). As a result lesbians are excluded from sharing the privileges which are controlled by the dominant heterosexual culture:

To be lesbian is to be *perceived* as someone who has stepped out of line, who has moved out of sexual/economic dependence on a male, who is woman-identified. A lesbian is perceived as someone who can live without a man, and who is therefore (however illogically) against men. A lesbian is perceived as being outside the acceptable, routinized order of things. A lesbian is perceived as a threat to the nuclear family, to male dominance, to the very heart of sexism.
(Pharr, 1988, p. 18) (italics in original text)

As stated previously, Lorde (1984) defines heterosexism as "the belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving and thereby its right to dominance," and homophobia as "the fear of feelings of love for member's of one's own sex and therefore the hatred of those feeling in others" (p. 45). Heterosexism is institutionalized to ensure its predominance and homophobia is the 'weapon' used to ensure "heternormativity" is regulated. It is acceptable for heterosexuals to be open about their sexuality but if lesbians do, then the usual response is to say "we are flaunting it" (Pharr, 1988). This maintains lesbian invisibility and excludes lesbians from being equal members of our society. Lesbians are denied the rights and privileges afforded to heterosexuals. Exclusion based on sexual orientation still remains one of the most acceptable forms of discrimination in our society, and as yet the rights of lesbians and gays have not been explicitly stated in the Canadian Human Rights Charter. The recent defeat of Bill 167 (which was an attempt by the Ontario Provincial Government to legislate the re-definition of 'spouse' to include

homosexual couples) in 1994, and the virulent opposition this year (1995) to the Bill C-41 (Federal Government legislation recognizing that crimes such as gay-bashing are motivated by hate) demonstrate that homophobia prevails in our highest institutions. Despite advocacy efforts to ensure rights, lesbian and gay people continually experience the lack of affirmation of themselves, their culture and their relationships within societal institutions.

Despite the mainstream assumption lesbianism is not just about sex but can be an option to resist patriarchy (Phelan, 1993) and its existence signals the possibility of resisting constructed sex categories to other women (Frye, 1983). Choosing a lesbian existence can signal that the “appropriation of women results from a social relationship and not a biological fact, that the category ‘woman’ is a social construct and not a ‘natural group’” (Durocher, p.16). It is precisely because, stereotypically, lesbians are not committed to the maintenance of a heterosexual culture that they confront discrimination in societal institutions (Arnup, 1984; Crumpacker & Haegan, 1984; Hall, 1986; Khayatt, 1990; Levine & Leonard, 1984; Wine, 1990).

Institutionalized heterosexism and homophobia silences lesbians and marginalizes lesbian reality. Rich (1986) suggests that “the possibility of a woman who does not exist sexually for men - the lesbian possibility - is buried, erased, occluded, distorted, misnamed, and driven underground” (p. 71). The radical feminists critique of heterosexuality as an institution continually discloses that women have been forced to acquiesce to men in a society that serves only their interests. Rich (1986) concluded that “heterosexuality has been both forcibly and sublimely imposed on women” (p. 57). The ‘lie’ of compulsory female

heterosexuality perpetuates the assumption that heterosexuality is innate and natural which is set up as antithetical to the so-called “perversion” associated with a lesbian existence.

The lie keeps numberless women psychologically trapped, trying to fit mind, spirit, and sexuality into a prescribed script because they cannot look beyond the parameters of the acceptable. [...]. The lesbian trapped in the “closet,” the woman imprisoned in prescriptive ideas of the “normal” share the pain of blocked options, broken connections, lost access to self-definition freely and powerfully assumed. (Rich, 1986, p. 64)

It has been documented that lesbian visibility is a threat to the maintenance of male power within a heterosexual society (Kitzinger, 1987). The question that can be asked is how does society react to this threat? Durocher (1991) suggested that revealing the social construction of heterosexuality causes the heterosystem to “cover the tracks of its construction, either by imposing a severe repression of homosexuality or by integrating it into its discourse” (p. 14). This is similar to what Kitzinger (1987) identifies in The Social Construction of Lesbianism. Kitzinger suggests that the repression of homosexuality (she focuses on lesbianism) occurred through the construction of lesbians as deviant and sick. She states “the label of mental illness serves, then, to invalidate and depoliticize incipient challenges the dominant version of reality, explaining them in terms of individual weakness and personal pathology” (p. 33). In sports this has been manifested in research which posited that sports masculinize women (Colker & Spatz-Widom, 1980; Myers & Lips, 1978). However, in the 1960’s and early 1970’s the lesbian was being reconceptualized as an individual seeking her own sexual preference, searching for loving and self-fulfilling relationships, and one who could contribute to the diversity of humanity (Kitzinger, 1987). This reconceptualization occurred around

the same time as the second wave of feminism and an upsurge in the Gay liberation movement which resulted in the discrediting of the lesbian pathological model (Kitzinger, 1987). ‘Homosexuality’ was now being integrated in the heterosystem’s research (Durocher, 1991). Kitzinger (1987) identifies this as “gay affirmative” research (p. 21). Durocher and Kitzinger have suggested that both strategies, repression and integration, adopted by heterosexual society defuse the threat homosexuality poses to the social system. This is illustrated by Kitzinger who states:

Psychology has (on the whole) shifted from pathologizing lesbianism, with associated attempts to prevent and eradicate it, to an alternative strategy which relies on constituting and regulating subjectivities about lesbianism which, while not preventing or eradicating it, render it politically innocuous. [...]. The depoliticization of lesbianism is achieved in today’s psychology in a form adapted to the new social context of today: its effectiveness as a form of social control is undiminished. (p. 39)

Kitzinger (1987) labels this research ‘liberal humanist’ which concentrates on the dignity and worth of the individual. This gay affirmative stance provided a new direction within sociological and psychological research on lesbians. The theoretical premise upon which it is based was that lesbianism (and homosexuality in general) is just another expression of sexual preference and acceptance of different lifestyles was necessary in society. While this is a positive step in attempting to eliminate discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, it fails to acknowledge that some women view their lesbian sexuality as a political act against patriarchy. In this analysis Kitzinger (1987) concludes that the lesbian becomes “a private and depoliticized entity” (p. 45). She further adds that

Through a focus on the privatized ‘true self’ of the lesbian, in which her ‘real’ identity is located, psychologists promote such ‘human’ goals as self-actualization, self-fulfillment, and personal happiness

for lesbians, thus emphasizing person-change rather than system change, and distracting attention from the sociopolitical and institutional aspects of lesbian oppression and the lesbian threat. (p. 39)

Kitzinger (1987) identifies four themes pervasive throughout liberal humanist research on lesbianism; (1) a belief in the similarity of lesbian and heterosexual women, (2) rejection of lesbianism as the central focus of identity, (3) lesbianism is as natural as heterosexuality, and (4) denying the threat that lesbians pose to the nuclear family and society and their contribution to society's rich diversity. These themes are consistent with themes found in the literature on lesbians in sport; (1) the belief that heterosexual women and lesbians experience similar oppressions in sport is reflected in liberal feminist alternatives to sport. They suggest widening the parameters for the participation of all women in order that they can all experience self-fulfillment and empowerment through sport (without always recognizing the multiple layers of oppressions which some women in sport confront); (2) the rejection of lesbianism as the central focus of identity is illustrated in reports that the athlete's sexual preference distracts from their physical ability, and that homosexuals are individual and athletes, no more, no less; (3) that sports experience can assist in developing women's allegiance to one another and that sexual expression between women in sport is not the central issue; (4) identifying homosexuality as simply a choice of lifestyle, a different sexual preference for some athletes; and finally, (5) the dignity of all athletes, the extinction of devaluing lesbians as human beings, providing a safe and affirming climate for lesbians in sport to eliminate oppression and celebrate diversity is a theme which pervades most of the sport literature mentioning lesbians.

This literature highlights and advances the understanding of lesbian sexuality in sports. It is essential, however, that an emphasis on changing the hegemonic structures becomes the focus rather than on lesbian conformity and assimilation into existing social structures. Kitzinger (1987) suggests that attitudes of tolerance and acceptance of the *healthy homosexual* (italics added) and her or his lifestyle reduce the threat that ‘homosexuality’ may pose to the dominant order. It renders it merely a harmless expression of sexuality. These attitudes contribute to an ignorance of the pain of invisibility and denial of the social realities with which lesbians live. Since the issue of women’s sexuality in sport has advanced feminist researchers have continually strived to increase support and affirmation of lesbian sexuality. They stress that there must be a commitment to establish a safe and affirming climate for lesbians (Griffin, 1989).

As identified earlier the concept of homophobia in women’s sport has been used to explain; the irrational fear that maintains the isolation and silencing of lesbians in sport (Baxter, 1983, 1987; Kidd, 1983) and the means by which heterosexual women and lesbians are prevented from striving for empowerment through sports (Brown, 1991; Lenskyj, 1983, 1984, 1987; Griffin, 1989; Griffin & Genasci, 1990; Rotella & Murray, 1991; Rounds, 1991). Kitzinger (1987) labels homophobia a constructed “diagnostic reversal” (p. 57) which shifts the classification of lesbian as pathological, to the individual, who cannot accept lesbians, as disturbed. This approach is concerned with homophobia’s effect on the individual homophobe rather than those who are the victims of homophobia. Kitzinger states that homophobia as a construct ignores institutionalized oppression of lesbians. She criticizes the use of operationally defined scales to measure

homophobia as they place the emphasis on individuals to react to “pro-gay” and “anti-gay” (p. 59) statements. Individuals are, therefore, categorized and encouraged to change their homophobic attitudes as opposed to challenging society to change the systemic discrimination towards lesbians.

Kitzinger (1987) is critical of how the concept of homophobia has been popularized in psychology, society and with lesbian and gay organizations. She suggested that this has had the effect of promoting the disciplines of psychology and therapy. The *experts* (italics added) strive to assist the lesbian and gay individuals to discover their own self-worth and rescue the homophobic individual from their disturbed attitudes. Promoting the discipline of psychology and its attempts to reduce the impact of homophobia is the focus of work by Margolies, Becker and Jackson-Brewer (1989) and Rotella and Murray (1991). Kitzinger (1987) argues that it is less threatening to view homophobia in individual terms than to look at it with a political perspective. She states:

Homophobia serves to depoliticize oppression against homosexuals and lesbians, and legitimates with the name of science, a particular set of liberal humanistic principles as the appropriate components of subjectivities about homosexuality. (p. 62)

Durocher (1991) is also critical of this celebration of differing sexual “preferences” and suggests that it is not incongruent with the heterosystem’s ideology. Presenting lesbianism as a “lifestyle” negates it as a form of resistance to the heterosystem and does not recognize that lesbianism may be socially constructed. Durocher states that the “heterosystem has the capacity to absorb and transform critical and dissenting positions and discourses to fit its own image and, in doing so, defuses any threat to its own existence” (p. 14). This is similar to what Whitson (1984) identifies as the dominant culture’s process of absorbing potentially

contradictory alternatives into its structure by incorporating them within its own meanings and practices thus maintaining its own value system.

A radical feminist analysis would advocate that heterosexism be recognized as a dominant perspective in patriarchal culture. Heterosexual hegemony has resulted in institutionalized heterosexuality which has consequences for both lesbians and society (Lenskyj, 1991). Society may endorse some tolerance of differing lifestyles and sexual preferences but resists attempts to socially and legally support lesbian political rights. In confronting heterosexism radical feminists attempt to diffuse the power of homophobia. This will assist in eliminating oppression and in affirming diversity (Brown, 1991; Griffin & Genasci, 1990; Palzkill, 1990).

Choosing a radical feminist analysis offered me a "theory central to which is an analysis of lesbianism and heterosexuality as political institutions and a rejection of personalized interpretations" (Kitzinger, 1987, p. 63). This is an alternative approach to liberal humanistic perspectives which posits that lesbianism is not a threat to society. My premise was that lesbians in sport are oppressed by homophobia which is reproduced by institutionalized heterosexism and that this may impact on their experiences. Kitzinger (1987) and Durocher (1991) identify lesbianism as a potential threat to patriarchy and view radical feminism as a conceptual tool for analyzing lesbianism as a political stand against the heterosystem.

The threat lies in the possibility that a discourse on the political significance of lesbianism might develop a class consciousness in women and provide a concrete means of breaking out of the relationship of appropriation. (Durocher, 1991, p. 16)

Lenskyj (1991) draws from Kitzinger's The Social Construction of Lesbianism (1987) to support the need for a political understanding of lesbianism in sport. Lenskyj critiques previous studies in sport suggesting that the research concentrated on depoliticizing and privatizing lesbianism resulting in a "conspiracy of silence" (p. 65). She concludes that naming and challenging lesbian oppression from a radical feminist perspective will recognize the political impact of lesbianism and develop political strategies to act for change in sport. Privatizing lesbian experience disempowers lesbian action for political change. Durocher (1991) states:

As long as this resistance is only practiced on an individual basis and is not accompanied with a collective, public discourse, it remains an individual act which has no political impact on the heterosystem. (p. 16)

A radical feminist discourse provides a powerful indication for the direction for future research with lesbians in sport (Lenskyj, 1991). This exploration provides us with an understanding of how lesbians construct their realities in sport and identifies whether cultural attitudes impact on their experience.

The social constructionist perspective that theoretically informs my theoretical framework is not without its criticisms. It is important to indicate that there is a weakness in the social constructionist argument. Fuss (1989) suggests that the perspective does offer a strong theoretical position from which to investigate sexual identities and their socio-political meanings. However, she is critical that it only views identities as socially constructed which negates the individual psychic consciousness in identity formation.

In other words, it is to disregard the importance of the psychoanalytical insight which holds that homosexuality is not opposed to heterosexuality but lies within it-as its very precondition since all identity is based on exclusion. Dismissals of homophobia in favor of heterosexism overlook the fact that homosexual desire

plays a role in all psychical formations. (p. 110) (emphasis in original text)

Fuss (1989) identifies that the social constructionist view of homosexuality is challenged by essentialists who claim their homosexual identity as an “identity politics based on shared essence” (p. 98). Social constructionism, therefore, poses a threat to what Fuss defines as lesbian theory which posits the existence of a “lesbian essence” (p. 98).

Identifying a lesbian essence assumes that essentially all lesbians share the same needs, experiences, concerns and resources. Their identities would not be defined or dependent on social interactions (De Lauretis, 1990). The social constructionist perspective defines experience as a product of social interaction and the meaning ascribed to those experiences is determined by the social location of the individual. A lesbian identity is, therefore, an active construction of one’s own historical context (De Lauretis, 1990; Kitzinger, 1987). De Lauretis suggests that

Women take up a position, a point of perspective, from which to interpret or (re)construct values and meanings. That position is also a political assumed identity, and one relative to their sociohistorical location, whereas essentialist definitions would have woman’s identity or attributes independent of her external situation. (p. 262)

The fact that I purposively sampled only lesbian athletes assumed a suspicion that they *essentially* experience a particular social location which sets them apart from other women in sport. Yet at the same time I incorporated a perspective that viewed these essential locations and experiences as socially constructed. A radical feminist framework “which draws its strength and staying power from a receptivity to cultural differences” (Fuss, 1989, p. 99) informed the process of my research. The descriptions and interpretations were grounded in the personal experiences and socio-historical context in which the lesbian athletes

located themselves, thus reporting the multiple realities which they experienced in sport.

Rich (1986) concludes that questioning the institution of heterosexuality allows feminists to demonstrate the silence that exists in society and explore new possibilities.

The assumption that “most women are innately heterosexual” stands as a theoretical and political stumbling block for feminism [...] to acknowledge that for women heterosexuality may not be a “preference” at all but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force is an immense step to take if you consider yourself freely and “innately” heterosexual. [...]. To take the step of questioning will call for a special quality of courage but I think the rewards will be great. (pp. 50-51)

Through this study, which combined radical feminist theory and sports sociology, the realities of lesbians in sport are brought to the attention of all those involved in sports. In attempting to raise the consciousness of athletes and sporting associations to address this issue and overcome inequities in sport, I also hoped that the lesbians athletes would become intensely cognizant of their potential to assume control over their sporting lives and challenge “heteronormativity.”

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

As I understand it feminism means resisting (alone and together) all the ways that women are controlled, used, limited, and made to accept definitions of ourselves that we did not create and do not want. It means analyzing the conditions in women's lives and in our society so we can make productive changes. Since silence has been such a large part of our oppression as women, we resist by speaking, by making up names for what we know, and by changing the language that has left so much in women's lives unnamed and misnamed." (Keith Louise Fulton, 1993, p.5)

The purpose of this thesis research was to explore the subjective experiences of lesbians in sport. The task of describing the experiences of *all* lesbians in sport was beyond the scope of this project. However, the participants who shared their stories with me have succeeded in creating a vital commentary on their lives as lesbians in sport. There has been a paucity of empirical research in this area, therefore, lesbian athletes accounts or stories are not always readily accessible for analysis. It was essential then to take into account the purpose of the research and determine the best way possible to accomplish a way these lesbian athletes could create knowledge and tell their stories (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). A "methodology is a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed" (Harding, 1987, p. 3), and this thesis is informed by feminist methodology. Feminist methodologies identify women's experiences as the centre of the research focus (Kirby, 1991) and strive to achieve approaches that can be used to understand women's worlds (Harding, 1987). For this research the objective was to record and report descriptions of a way of life, to discover how lesbian athletes construct their realities in sport. To this end, I conducted in-depth interviews with eight lesbian athletes between March 1992 and November 1994.

Women have been systematically denied the possibility of producing knowledge (Harding, 1987) and this can be extended to include lesbians who are further marginalized in society (Frye, 1983). Using feminist methodology to guide this thesis, I explored lesbian experiences' in sport and how lesbians gave meaning to their social situations. Kirby and McKenna (1989) identify this type of methodology as one that stems from the margins and those who live in marginal contexts; "those who suffer injustice, inequality and exploitation" (p. 33).

The methodology from the margins is based on the commitment to advancing knowledge through research grounded in the experience of living on the margins. . . . In particular, methods from the margins must focus on describing reality from the perspective of those who have been excluded as producers of research. (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p. 64)

Feminist methodologies with their emphasis on the qualitative process was selected for this research because they place women's experiences at the centre of the research process.

Sample

The sample was a purposive one. Purposive sampling identifies a particular group who can provide an understanding of the research focus and who can elicit the most comprehensive information about the topic of interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I was interested in researching the experiences of athletes who identified themselves as lesbian; who participated in team sports at an inter-varsity or elite level of competition; and who participated on teams that did not identify as lesbian. Participants were invited to join in the study by "snowball" and "friendship network" sampling and were selected for participation based on the following criteria; 1) an interest in the research; 2) an ability to articulate their personal

experiences; 3) a willingness to participate in the research within the conditions I have set for confidentiality/privacy; 4) willingness to be part of the on-going process of the research; 5) local availability and 6) English speaking. The participants pretty much self-selected themselves, either I was given the names of individuals "I should talk to," or participants were told about the research through someone else, or expressed an interest to participate while talking to me about the research.

Participants - Sport and Lesbian Biographies

All eight participants were Canadian. Seven were Anglophones, one was a Francophone. All the participants were white and came from middle-class backgrounds. Although local availability was a criteria, I did have the opportunity to interview three athletes from Vancouver and one athlete from Toronto. The remaining four participants live in Winnipeg. Due to the criteria I had set for participant's involvement, inter-varsity to elite level athletes, all the participants were university educated and their areas of study covered physical education, english, arts and political studies. The athletes competed in the following sports; basketball, field hockey, ice hockey, lacrosse and water-polo. Generally, they had between one to twelve years experience in high performance sport. I have given each athlete a pseudonym to maintain the confidentiality of their accounts. The participants were as follows (names are pseudonyms);

"Kelly" was an 18 year old student who had competed at club provincial and national championships in her sport. At the time of interviewing she was still actively involved in high performance sport.

“Tina” was a 20 year old student who had competed at club provincial and national championships in her sport. At the time of interviewing she was still actively involved in high performance sport.

“Aoife” was a 22 year old student who had competed at a provincial, national and CIAU (Canadian Intervarsity Athletic Union) level in her sport. She had also been identified as a potential national team prospect. At the time of interviewing she was still actively participating in high performance sport.

“Dara” was a 24 year old student, sales assistant and writer for her university newspaper. She had competed at club provincial and national championships in her sport. She had just stopped competing in high performance sport.

“Sandra” was a 30 year old teacher. She had competed at CIAU level in her sport. She was no longer participating in high performance sport, although she was still actively involved in recreational sport.

“Meghan” was a 32 year old teacher. She had participated provincially in a number of sports but in her main sport she had competed for Canada at international competitions including two World Cups. At the time of interviewing she was still actively involved in high performance sport.

“Julie” was a 33 year old research co-ordinator. She had competed provincially and nationally in her sport. In addition she had competed for Canada at international competitions including a World Cup and pre-Olympic qualifying competition. Although she had retired from high performance competition she was still involved in recreational sport.

"Heidi" was a 33 year old teacher. She had competed provincially and nationally in her sport. In addition she had competed for Canada at international competitions including a World Cup and pre-Olympic qualifying competition. Although she had retired from high performance sport she was still involved in recreational sport.

In addition to being elite level athletes these participants were also lesbians. I will describe, generally, what their lesbian biographies looked like when they were participating in their sports. This will establish a context through which to explore; their experiences in sport; the strategies they employed to manage their experiences and how they made sense of their experiences in sport. The length of time that these athletes had identified as lesbian varied. For the four participants aged 25 and younger, Aoife, Dara, Tina and Kelly it ranged from two to five years, for the four participants between 25 and 35, Sandra, Heidi, Meghan and Julie it ranged from 9 to 17 years. Of the eight participants five had current lesbian partners, the status of the other three women's relationships were not discussed in the first interview, although in a second interview one of these three women acknowledged she had a current partner.

When I asked them in the interview, "how would you define your sexual identity and what words are you most comfortable with describing yourself," I got a range of responses. Seven of the participants identified as "lesbian," Dara called herself "queer." Of the seven participants Heidi, Tina and Kelly initially responded that they were lesbian but preferred to use the word "gay" to describe themselves. Although Meghan did not use "gay" to describe herself she stated, when I asked "had she always defined herself as lesbian?"

Sometimes it just seemed a little bit too strong because I am attracted to men. It doesn't mean that I'm not attracted to men, even sexually I'm attracted to men. It comes down to the comfort level in the long run. (p.9)

Similarly Julie responded that she now called herself a 'lesbian' but was not always comfortable with that label:

That's interesting because if you'd asked me that question six years ago I would've said 'bisexual' and I've been bisexual for a number of years and it actually explained a lot of my - it was an accurate description of who I was in love with and who I had sex with. (My female partner) and I've been involved now for six years and I wind up using the term 'lesbian' loosely and feeling more comfortable with that now. So it's been an interesting progress. I'm not one of those lucky few who at age 5 wakes up and says "I'm a lesbian." (p. 3)

Aoife also stated that it "took her a couple of years" before she really knew or defined herself as lesbian but now she was comfortable with being called "lesbian, dyke or lezzie." Among the participants Dara was the only one who used the word "queer" to describe herself. She stated:

I like it better. At first I didn't like the term [...] but I like it even better than 'lesbian' just because it envelops so many more people I think than just "gay and lesbian." It's inclusive, you can just say "queer" and it's everybody. [...]. It embraces everybody that is not in the status quo whether they're straight and into S/M or not! [...]. I think it's a term of the '90's! (pp.10-11a)

In a second interview she added:

I think as far as 'queer', 'lesbian', 'dyke', 'gay', they're just labels and some people just feel comfortable with one or the other. I like being called 'queer' more than 'lesbian' but I find lately that it just changes depending on where I'm at and how I feel. I've been using 'dyke' a lot lately just because I feel dyke is a really strong word and when I want to feel strong I use that. Queer, I guess I think it does encompass a bigger community, bigger than just the women's community and bigger even than the gay community. Like there is so many different people, trans-gender people, and I guess that's everybody that's not the status quo. Queer is not being part of the status quo and not really wanting to be and there's straight people who are queer too because there are straight people who are into

different things, not just having sex in the missionary position.
(p.1b)

In addition to asking them how they defined their sexual identity I asked them were they 'out' (disclosed that they were lesbian) to anyone in their sports career. All the participants declared that initially in their elite sports they were not 'out' to their coaches or teammates. Dara recalled:

I was out with my parents and family and with some of my really good friends but at that time I was not out in (my sport). I'm sure people picked up on it. Like people, you know, they're not stupid but I was never comfortable. (pp.12-13a)

Sandra did not disclose to anyone in her sport that she was a lesbian but presumed by the end of her university career that "everybody knew!" Likewise Heidi and Tina were not 'out' to heterosexual players but assumed that others knew they were lesbian, and along with Kelly stated that they were 'out' with other gay players in their sports. In addition to being 'out' with the lesbian players on her team Meghan had 'come out' to her team manager. Aoife was the only other athlete who had explicitly 'come out' to her coach and her heterosexual teammates. She remembered why she told her teammates:

The reason I came out - it's kind of a long story - I came out on the team because I moved in with one of the players who was a very good friend of mine, we were very close but weren't partners or lovers, or even thinking about it. I mean I thought she was great, I lusted after her but that was ridiculous because it was never going to happen. She was the straightest women in the world, unbeknownst to me she was not the straightest women in the world (laughs). Anyway, the long and the short of it was we got together (then) she realized she could be with this other woman so she went to pursue this other woman and I was kind of left having just had this major awakening and there was no place to go. I had to tell a couple of my friends because they were my friends and I needed support from somebody because I wasn't getting any and I told them and they turned around and told a lot of other people. So I am out, everybody on the team knows my sexuality but I haven't told them! (pp.12-13a)

In addition she told her coach:

I came out to (my coach) because I didn't want to play summer (sport). I just wanted to go away during that (summer of trauma). I had to move out of the apartment I was sharing with this ex-lover and I didn't want to play because I was so traumatized and I couldn't deal with it. But I had to tell her because she was my personal, regional coach and I had to go through her to do that. And I just ended up telling her everything, I spilled my guts. (pp.21-22a)

Finally, Julie stated, that despite the fact that her most significant relationships were always with women, "it wasn't until I got out (of sport), that I came out!"

As well as the range of self-definitions and stages of disclosure in their sports careers their accounts also identified the range of feelings they had during their 'early days' as lesbians in their sports. Seven participants indicated that they were not comfortable with being lesbian when they were first 'coming out.' Sandra "didn't want to admit it to myself and certainly didn't want to admit it to other people." The following two accounts illustrate the range of feelings most participants had about their developing lesbian identities:

At that time everybody was always talking about homosexuality 'cause there was some of the coaches that were sort of labeled as being lesbian and I just sort of said, "oh, this is taboo, this is not right." I felt like a homophobic person myself in a lot of ways just because of my own attraction to women and trying to suppress some of that. I don't know it was definitely a struggle. (Meghan, p.11)

Whereas Aoife recalled that she "never had any doubts about (her) sexuality. She recalled that being a lesbian was the "one thing that (she) wasn't grieving about!"

When I said I never had any doubts about my sexuality, I think that I meant to say that I always knew I was not straight. I reached a point in my life where I was confident with my sexuality after my first break-up that I was happily exploring my community on my own. I was ready to come out, mentally. (pp.1-2b)

Of course the way these participants felt about being lesbian did not remain static throughout their lives in sport.

Although I've struggled with it because, you know, before I used to think that it as wrong, it wasn't acceptable and now I'm getting so many people to accept me, and knowing , "well, it can't be that bad!" It's not an issue for me anymore. (Meghan, p.24)

Although most of the participants are still not 'out' explicitly in their lives in sport or elsewhere, generally, their acceptance of their lesbian identities ranged from, as Kelly recalled, "getting to the point where I've accepted it more than ever," where they had "come to terms with" their identities to, as Tina stated, being "very proud of who I am."

Method

The purpose of this research was to give lesbian athletes the opportunity to break the silence that envelops them in sport. The method I used to meet this objective and to provide for a rich description of the multiple realities of the athletes was a semi-structured, in-depth interview technique. A framework of questions was prepared to guide the interviews (Appendix A) and ensure that the research focus was explored. The goal of the interviews was to have the participants reflect upon their experiences as lesbian athletes. The interview schedule was designed to establish a picture of their lives and questions explored; the meaning of sport as an activity; their experiences as lesbians in sport; their interpretations of their experiences as lesbians in sport; and their future visions for sport. The interview guide provided a general framework for the interviews, and was informed by my knowledge of previous research and my own experience.

Oakley (1981) identifies interviews as "a strategy for documenting women's own accounts of their lives" and "as a tool for making possible the articulated and recorded commentary of women" (p. 48). Throughout the research process I

continually examined the question quality, order and direction of the interview schedule to maintain the focus of the research. The interviews were an interactive conversation and allowed the athletes to disclose their stories on a one-to-one basis. At the same time they received immediate support, verbal reinforcement and feedback from me to acknowledge that their accounts were valid.

The participants were informed of the research purpose in our first contacts and when we met I provided each participant with a synopsis of the research (from my submission to faculty ethics) and an interview guide. In addition we discussed what form the interview would take, i. e., length of interview, type of questions to be covered. I brought two copies of the consent form (Appendix B) to the interview which both the participant and myself signed. This letter of consent outlined the purpose of the research and the rights and obligations of both the participant and myself. Each interview was tape recorded upon the consent of the participant and ranged from one to two hours in length. Following each interview the tape-recording was transcribed verbatim for subsequent data management and analysis.

Seven interviews were carried out over a period of 18 months beginning in March 1992. The last interview was carried out in the November 1994. In the first 18 months I did some preliminary analysis of interview themes. From this I generated a second set of questions for each participant. Each participant was sent a copy of the preliminary analysis, a copy of the interview recording, and a request for a second contact. The participants out of province were sent a second set of questions, a blank tape to record their responses and a letter updating my current progress. From this 'mail out' I received two responses (one taped, one typed). In addition, I set up a second interview with a local participant. One other participant

wished to be interviewed a second time but unfortunately our schedules did not allow for another interview.

As part of the research design I also recorded my reflections and field notes to describe the interview process, to provide interpretive comments on how I conducted the interviews and how the participants responded, to reflect on the process and content, and to identify emerging themes. Some of these reflections were recorded on the tape immediately after the interview. In addition, before transcribing the tapes I listened to each interview and recorded notes on the content of the interview and my process during it, i.e., use of probes, whether I forgot a major question, whether I was distracted by the setting. The notes were recorded in two journals which I kept, one for reflections on the process of the research, another for my reflections on the emerging content. These journals are documents of my personal thoughts and assumptions during the entire research process and continually provided direction and refinement of my process. This detailed recording also helped me to be continually aware of my conceptual baggage which may have influenced the development of the study and allowed me to identify my pre-conceived ideas, notions and prejudices. These recordings were an essential piece of how I adhered to feminist methodologies.

Doing feminist research demands that my participation and presence - my voice - within my research project must be explicitly admitted and included in the product of that research. (Haggis, 1990, p. 77)

Recording allowed me to acknowledge "directly the relationship between the research and (my) private and political lives and opinions" (Kirby, 1991, p. 176). By explicitly stating my assumptions and conceptual baggage I feel that the research can be evaluated by others within an appropriate context. It remains essential that

my researcher's subjectivity and that of the participant are not eliminated in the process.

Power and Ethics

This research involved a relationship, an interaction between the researcher (me) and the researched. Embedded in this relationship there is often a power differential in favour of the researcher. This power initially fueled the research and directed me to ask questions. However, it was essential that this power was not abused. Ristock (1989) states that "the notion of power for feminists is often problematic because of our desire to empower rather than misuse or abuse power" (p. 39):

... we treat our participants with respect and equality; we locate ourselves within the questions we ask in our research; we seek to make our research socially useful, but the issue of power remains- regardless of our attempts at sisterhood, thoughtfulness and sensitivity. (p. 40)

I acknowledge that I had power in the research process, in terms of asking questions, providing reflection, analysis and ending the process (Ristock, 1989). Stating and explicitly defining my own experience, position and bias in formulating a theoretical framework ensured that I, as researcher, acknowledged my responsibility to the participant. In addition, it prevented the exploitation and negation of my voice over the voices of the participants (Kirby & McKenna, 1989; Oakley, 1981). Ristock (1989) poses the question "for whom am I writing this dissertation?" (p. 39). Although my knowledge fueled the research and questions, it is also essential that I acknowledge that in this process I discovered knowledge created by the participants (Harding, 1987; Kirby, 1991; Ristock, 1989). The intent of my process was to be consistent with feminist research, to present the

opportunity to those on the margins to create knowledge. The intention was to allow the subjective accounts of the athletes to become the data that I analyzed. Feminist researchers indicate that research should not be “on persons” but “with persons” (Kirby, 1991, p. 172). With this in mind representation of findings are, therefore, balanced and illuminated by the active voice of the participants (Harding, 1987). Their words are those you will see most as readers. Each athlete is represented because they all provided valuable insight into their lesbian lives. One of the inherent pieces of power that I had was to select ‘what was said’, ‘who said it’ and ‘what it best illustrated.’ I have endeavoured to honour all the participants stories so that they may feel represented in the description of their accounts and in fact I often found it difficult to leave any of their words out.

I always tried to overcome the power dynamic between myself and the participant by involving the athletes in monitoring the data gathering process, consulting them during the preliminary analysis, and negotiating the destination of the research. I was sensitive and respectful of the participant needs, provided them with non-judgmental feedback, and conducted all encounters in a non-threatening manner. Taking into account:

That in any situation where one is the interviewer, a power dynamic already exists. The interviewers knowledge of this and sensitivity around this issue is important. It is the sharing of information about self, as much as that is possible, that breaks the dominant/dominated dynamic. (Silvera, 1989, x.)

I was careful to make the participants aware of who I was in this research so I developed an introductory ‘speech’ about myself. In addition, I also shared my experiences in the interviews with them. Furthermore, when I asked them what words they used to define their sexuality, which words they felt comfortable with, I

endeavoured to use *their* descriptors throughout the interview. I also held back in the interviews from naming their experiences as experiences of ‘heterosexism’ or ‘homophobia’ if they did not define them as such. Kirby and McKenna (1989) suggests that research should be “non-invasive” (p. 79). To be non-invasive means that the participant needs are respected in the process of gathering the data. With this in mind I made the data collection, the recording instrument and the note-taking as unobtrusive and non-threatening as possible.

In the research I adhered to feminist research ethical guidelines according to Kirby (1991). In addition to the ethical responsibilities addressed in the preceding section I made sure that; informed consent was obtained, and all participants had the option to withdraw at any time during the process; confidentiality, privacy and the dignity of the participants was ensured and they were invited to play an equal part in the research process. In addition, their identities are not disclosed in the analysis or reported of findings, their names were removed from the transcripts and tapes and codes were assigned. At the completion of the research the tapes will be erased. Furthermore, no deception was used, and the process was structured to meet the needs of the participants, and I did not create or contribute any undue risks to them during or after their part in the research process ended.

Analysis

The transcribed interviews were read several times during which I identified key phrases and words which assisted in determining what Glaser and Strauss, 1967 described as “categories” and “properties.” I made margin notes on the transcripts, flagged and colour coded emerging themes. These themes provided descriptions of their experiences and identified meaningful pieces of information

about their lives in the sports world. At this point I looked for "in vivo" codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), terms used by the participants, to describe the emerging concepts. This breaking down of the transcript allowed me to describe the concepts as individual pieces of information. These themes then were constantly compared, coded and reflected upon to provide a rich and complex description of the lives of the lesbian athletes.

In essence, analysis consists of moving data from category to category (constant comparative), looking for what is common (properties) and what is uncommon (satellites) within categories and between categories. The data is arranged and rearranged until some measure of coherence becomes evident (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p. 146)

After the first coding of the interviews I recognized that their accounts fell into five specific "domains." Consequently, I organized the first descriptions of their experiences in the following way; *what* were the occurrences of positive and negative experiences in their lives in sport; *who* was significant in contributing to their experiences in sport; *how* did the participants cope with their experiences; *why* did they think they had the experiences they did in sports; and the *consequences* of their experiences in their lives. These initial organizing themes emerged as a result of the questions I was asking; can you tell me a story about your experiences (what), how do others treat you (who), how do you cope (how), how do you feel (consequences), and how do you explain what happens (why). Within each one of these domains sub-themes emerged which illustrated the domain (i. e., "I just left the team" was 'how' they coped; "I'm sick of explaining my sexuality" reflected their feelings).

However, after further analysis I realized that these domains were not separate but rather that they overlapped to inform and shape the lives of the

participants in sports. What emerged from this second layer of analysis was a more complete picture of; the *context* in which they participated in sport, *what* their experiences were within that context, the *strategies* they used to deal with their experiences; how they made sense of (understood) the sports world as a homophobic and heterosexist institution; and how they made sense of (understood) their individual lives within that sports world (*why* it all happens). This gives a more complete picture of lesbians subjective experiences in sport. Thirty-three sub-categories emerged from coding within these domains, these sub-categories were arranged into four descriptive areas, and were then compared and assembled into six conceptual categories and three satellites (Appendix C). Kirby and Mckenna (1989) describe “satellites” as “uncommon” information that does not always “fit comfortably within categories” (p. 146). The “satellites” in the analysis of the lesbian accounts resisted inclusion in the conceptual categories but were “consequences” of the experiences incorporated in these categories.

Although the process was grounded in the women’s personal experiences (Frye, 1991; Harding, 1987; Morgan, 1983; Stanley & Wise, 1991), I did say in my research proposal that I would explore these lesbian athletes experiences from a radical feminist perspective. My review of the literature and my conceptual baggage informed the final conceptual categories that were then used to describe lesbian athletes experiences in sport. However, I feel the sub-categories which came together to form these categories accurately describe the participants experiences in sport and the use of “in vivo” codes meant that I was always attempting to relate the analysis to their direct experiences. This analysis allowed me to concentrate on those pieces of the interviews that illustrated how heterosexism and homophobia

works in sport and how they have impacted on the lives of these athletes. I am aware also that this theoretical framework may have limited the categories and themes which were generated from the data. However, at all times, I was extremely aware of my personal bias and believe that I have remained truthful to the voices of the participants throughout the process and to the experiences they shared in their accounts..

Validity

The goal of this research was to allow lesbian athletes to talk about their experiences in sport. A conflict in feminist research is how to report these subjective realities. However, this cannot be achieved fully as the process of interviewing, since interpreting interviews and making sense of others lives is one of objectification.

The question becomes how to produce an analysis which goes beyond the experience of the researched while still granting them full subjectivity. How do we explain the lives of others without violating their reality? (Acker, Barry & Esseveld, 1991, p. 142)

It was essential at all times that the athletes' voices are present throughout the recounting of their experiences. Defining my subjectivity throughout the process in my researcher's journal "makes available for ethical scrutiny the 'intellectual autobiography' of the researcher" (Tait, 1990, p. 183) and I remain accountable to the stories which the women articulated (Kirby, 1991). With this in mind I endeavoured to verify preliminary analysis with the individual participants. Kirby and McKenna (1989) identify that "asking back" (p. 122) must occur to be consistent with the dynamics of the research process. In addition, Guba and Lincoln (1981) state:

The determination of credibility can be accomplished only by taking data and interpretations to the sources from which they were drawn and asking directly whether they believe--find plausible--the results. This process of going to the sources--often called "member checks"--is the backbone of satisfying the truth-value criterion (p. 110)

Part of the interview involved a debriefing during which I asked the participants about the interview process and the research. All of them stated that it was important to get lesbian sports stories "out there!" One athlete was "kind of excited" about the prospect of being interviewed. While another stated:

(The interview) is wonderful, it's incredibly validating. It's great, it's great. That's why when I had the intial phone call from a friend, I just said, "god, you know, I'd love to talk about this." This is great, no, I think it's wonderful. I think your questions are great, they're well rounded and touch on all aspects. (Heidi, p.49)

As stated previously I did attempt to validate the findings by cross-checking with the participants in a second contact, however, not all the participants responded. However, one account from a second interview illustrated the importance of "asking back" for me. When I shared the preliminary findings with her she stated:

P: I liked to see the different perspectives, you know? You can tell who is older, who is more experienced. I know I'm the youngest, more inexperienced, just getting off with things, and I can tell from other quotes that someone had been through it a lot longer than I had been. [...]. You can definitely see the range.

I: You really articulated your feelings well, so I hope when you read it, you kind of felt that I was representing it properly?

P: Yeah. I was really pleased with what you put in from my input. Actually, I was surprised, I didn't know I had that much to offer towards it, to tell you the truth! (Kelly, p. 1b)

Several other participants were really happy about the opportunity to tell their stories and as the researcher it was validating to hear that they too felt that the thesis

topic and process was essential and that it felt "really good" to talk about their experiences.

Although generalization of the findings in feminist research is not an issue it is important to use the themes that are generated here to describe the social relations that may impact on the reality of lesbians . The lesbian athletes' experiences articulated here are subjective, not representative or generic, and this research acknowledges that we are all differently positioned and privileged, therefore, conclusions cannot be generalized. In addition, due to the exploratory nature of this thesis theoretical saturation may not have been reached in all the categories generated. However, the lesbian stories of their experiences can placed in a context of a sports world that is dominated and defined by white, heterosexual males. The research recognizes that lesbians are 'knowers' and that their experiences are 'legitimate knowledge,' and provide a vital commentary on our understanding of the sports world. Although the sample was small it has exposed issues that need to be addressed within the sports institution. The lesbian athletes accounts' improve our understanding of their lives as lesbian athletes and this identifies the need for action to produce social change which is an essential component of feminist research (Kirby, 1991; Millman & Kanter, 1987).

CHAPTER FOUR

STORIES FROM LESBIANS AND LOCKER ROOMS

"The word *lesbian* is instilled with the power to halt our work and control our lives. And we give it its power with our fear." (Suzanne Pharr, 1988, p. 25)

This chapter will describe the sports experiences of the lesbian athletes interviewed. Having described the culture of Canadian high performance sport (Chapter One) in which they participated I will first describe the meaning that sport had in the lives of these athletes. This provides a more complete picture and understanding of their experiences in sports because it establishes the 'essentialness' that sport had in their lives as elite athletes, and consequently, their desire to remain in sport despite the experiences they had there.

Sport - The Athletic Experience

All eight participants spoke about the centrality of sport in their lives. They were always encouraged to participate in sports from an early age:

My parents were enthusiastic. I had two parents who believed whatever their youngest child could do, whether it was play road hockey with her brothers, ride bikes, race down the street with them on roller skates, then great! They constantly encouraged, never discouraged. (Heidi, p.3)

Heidi was given every opportunity to succeed:

My parents both having (athletic) genes wanted me to have every possibility that was presented to me. So financially nothing ever held me back. If I needed money, equipment, rides to games they provided it. (Heidi, p.4)

Several women identified their fathers or other male role models as the most important influences in developing their love for sports:

My father was *very, very* big on sports. He pushed my brothers into sport, they never liked it, so I picked it up. That pleased my father. I had fun and that's basically how I got into sports. My father was very supportive and he encouraged me, he *understood* so he supported me. [...]. My brothers too often bragged about the accomplishments I made in sport. (Kelly, pp.2-3a)

My uncle had a lot to do with it. He taught me how to catch a ball, how to fight, how to throw. (Tina, p.2)

Overwhelmingly, most athletes were encouraged to try as Heidi stated, "anything and everything" in sport by both parents:

My parents were really positive, especially coming out to see the games, they just were really encouraging about me going for something that I really wanted to do. I can never think of anyone saying anything negative about it. It was very encouraging. I felt like people thought it was neat playing sports. (Sandra, pp.2-3)

In addition to parental and family encouragement some participants were further reinforced to pursue sport through peers and teachers who "backed a lot of activity for girls:"

(I had) teachers who were strong female role models, encouraging the girls to do whatever the boys could do. I was never discouraged. My school was renowned for it's athletics. They highly encouraged girls to do the best they could. (Heidi, pp.2,6)

The enthusiasm for sport demonstrated by others in their lives as children, and recognizing their own potential as they achieved sporting success, became factors that pushed sport to the forefront of these women's lives.

Currently the athletes are at various stages of sports participation, however, in their stories they described sport as being the "most important thing in (their) life," it was central to themselves, essential to their identities:

My athletic career started when I was seven. I was a jock, I was completely immersed in sport. [...]. Yes, I was completely immersed, lived and breathed sport. Thinking about it in some ways, I knew nothing else. I was good at it. I liked it, I loved the camaraderie, the team. I loved being physically active and being able

to push my body farther, that's still something I enjoy doing. (Julie, p.3)

This account echoed many elements of the participant's sport biographies. Sport was and is still for some, an essential focus and love of their lives. Heidi recalled that her sports career "all started when she was kicking in the womb," for others sport was the "biggest focus" in their lives and from what they remembered was the "best part" of their childhood's:

I was always very active, I loved athletics and I seemed to be naturally good at just about everything so I really enjoyed it. Sport was the most important thing in my life. I really loved it and I wouldn't have changed anything about my athletic pursuits. (Aoife, p.3a)

Some recollect that even at an early age they were "regular jocks" and "total keeners:"

I've always liked sports. I remember my big high in elementary school was playing soccer at recess, playing baseball and softball and wrestling with my cousins. I just always liked the feeling of being active. (Meghan, p.3)

Others recalled sport being "fun," "enjoyable and an "exciting" part of their lives:

After I stopped playing (university ball) I thought, "I'm never going to have that much fun at something again. I just never got tired of it. I would've liked to keep doing it for as long as I could. (Sandra, pp.4-5)

The physical nature of sport captivated the attention of these women, participants loved the competitive side of sports and the inherent challenge it provided:

For me, I thrive on the actual playing and physical challenge, and the mental challenge. [...]. I mean it's the actual feeling from playing, the intensity, the challenge that I thrive on that keeps me in (my sport). It's the thrill of the personal challenge involved. (Meghan, p.47)

All participants had an overwhelming desire to challenge themselves to improve their skills and push themselves to the physical limit:

I remember writing in a little black book of mine, my goal would be to make the Olympic team for basketball. I figured I would get into a sport that could take me the farthest, to the highest level possible.
(Tina, p.5)

Participating in sports for Aoife was tantamount to "fulfilling a dream" and contributed to her mental well-being. For all the participants sport was fundamental to their sense of self-concept, self-esteem, confidence and self-care. "Feeling in great shape" helped Sandra feel good physically, more capable in her job and, generally, to feel better about herself. Others who struggled with their confidence levels found that the confidence they gained from sport definitely transferred to other areas of her life to make them stronger people. Kelly stated:

(Sport) gave me a lot as far as confidence in myself, a lot of motivation. It helped me with my school work 'cause I was always motivated to do the best that I could in sport and it kind of overlapped and went into my school work. So it's helped me a lot as far as school *and* everyday life, I guess. (p.3a)

Sport also provided a 'mental' break from other demands:

When my parents were divorced (sport) was a bit of an escape. Doing something I loved, being around people supportive of me, it was wonderful, a release in a very positive way. It was great.
(Heidi, p.3)

The physical and mental benefits of pursuing a sports career were central to the athletes continued participation. Although the desire to achieve in sports was not one that these athletes necessarily felt they were born with or motivated themselves to do from an early age. They all acknowledged that dreams and desires for sport achievement were very much influenced by significant others in their lives in their early sports careers. However, they continued to pursue elite sport of their own

accord, *they wanted to do it, nobody pushed them, therefore, the “inherent challenge” that sport presented for these athletes coupled with their continued sports successes motivated them to strive to “be the best.”*

I love being the best, I didn’t like being second best, a step behind others. I’ve always had it inside me to be the best or to really put everything into something I love. I’ve found a sport that I love and that’s the biggest thing. (Tina, pp.1-7)

It was clear from their accounts that sports represented the “biggest and best” part of the participants lives, mentally, physically and socially. As they progressed and achieved more personal success they pursued sport at a high performance level to fulfil the challenges they set for themselves.

Sport - A Lesbian Space?

Despite the participants overwhelming love of sport and the centrality of it to their lives it was clear that this culture of sport did not treat them in the holistic way that was recommended by the Minister’s Task Force (see Chapter One). They were not allowed the freedom to express themselves as lesbians, neither were their lives free from harassment in sport.

In contrast the participants identified that they were passively and actively encouraged to suppress their lesbian identities in the culture of high performance sport. Messages conveyed about lesbian sexuality in their sports environments were rarely positive. Julie stated:

There isn’t a political force to say “it’s okay to be a lesbian and be in sport.” And because that wasn’t there people were hiding and when you see people hiding they’re afraid and you know it’s because it’s so damn homophobic!” (p.6-7)

Within their sports they confronted discrimination at both the micro level (from individual homophobes) and at the macro level (from institutionalized

heterosexism). In their everyday experiences it appeared that their interactions at the micro level affected their lives most as lesbian athletes. Two significant groups of individual homophobes impacted on their experiences, the athletes' coaches and their teammates (both heterosexual and lesbian).

Our coach, I mean she can set the tone, and unfortunately the tone that has been set is not one that brings about a lot of openness and discussion or sharing (Meghan, p.47)

All participants recognized that their coaches were in positions of power over them, especially since sport was and is central to their lives. The athletes, therefore, worked hard in their sports to impress their coaches. It was clear that these athletes wanted to demonstrate to their coaches that they were competent in the tasks they were assigned, could reach their potential and that they had few weaknesses. Being lesbian was not described as a 'weakness' by any of these athletes. However, they perceived that acknowledging one's lesbian sexuality would 'weaken' the coaches recognition of their competence and value as athletes and individuals. They perceived that they would have to be stronger people and better athletes to remain in the program. Aoife felt that the scrutiny that she perceived she was under, often prevented her from always playing her best. Yet at the same time being the best was essential to all these women because they feared they might be 'cut' from the team because they were lesbians.

P: I felt really under a lot of pressure to perform very well in my third year especially in order to prove to myself that I was really happy as a lesbian. "Look how happy I am, I have so much confidence, let me play!" I felt I had to prove myself.

I: Do you think that any of the other straight players on the team feel that they have to prove themselves?

P: Some of them do, but not for the same reasons, that's for sure!
(Aoife, p.34a)

Given this perception of coaches 'power over the athletes,' most of these women felt that disclosing their sexuality to their coaches was not an option for them in their sports, for many, their coaches "did not know" or "did not *need* to know" that they were lesbians.

Teammates also significantly contributed to negative attitudes towards lesbian sexuality but their attitudes had a different impact on the players because of their closer relationship to the participants:

As far as the team goes there's very few girls on our team who are (lesbian). Like a low percentage of the team. And ah, the other girls who aren't, they seem like they're *very, very* homophobic. (Kelly, p.7a)

While the participants could achieve some distance from their coaches, distance was more difficult to achieve between teammates. As varsity and elite level athletes they practiced many times together and spent long hours and days with their teams on road trips. Participants perceived that their teammates would be uncomfortable with lesbians, consequently, none of the eight participants had openly identified as lesbian to their teammates during their sports career unless they felt compelled to do so. However, that is not to say that they were not 'suspected' or 'gossiped' about by their teammates. Although teammates do not possess the power to influence the path of an athletes career as their coaches do, teammates do demonstrate power to sanction sexualities. They did so in similar ways to the coach but also in ways that were unique because of their closer access to their teammates:

(My teammates) were (saying about another player), "well, we don't know if she is one (lesbian) but we have our reasons to believe so we're going to stay away." You know? "We know *we're* not!" They're not going to take their chances! There's one girl in particular who if anyone (lesbian) was around, she didn't want anything to do with them! (Kelly, p.6b)

Overwhelmingly not being “the way it was supposed to be” echoed most participants’ experiences with their coaches and teammates. Attitudes were not always overtly discriminatory, however, neither did they convey many positive messages about lesbians. Generally, these athletes experienced hostile attitudes towards lesbian sexuality. This hostility and contempt towards lesbians was demonstrated in Kelly’s team motto:

If you’re straight, you can skate! (p.4b)

It was apparent from her experience then that heterosexism and homophobia flourished on her team as only heterosexuals were welcomed to play. In general, lesbians were “frowned upon,” “not understood” or, more usually, lesbian issues were “not addressed.” In team sports where there is an expectation of sameness and cohesion (the team is like a family) the rules of not fitting in are great. For lesbians then there are few options to be ‘out’ as lesbian athletes.

In high performance sport women athletes do not necessarily have only women coaches and the participants described male coaches attitudes towards lesbians. Dara told me she had heard “horror stories” about her former partner’s experience on a national team. The male coach’s reaction was either to avoid lesbian issues or explicitly discriminate against lesbians. He often stated, “we’ll have none of those (lesbians) on our team” (p.12a). However, this male coach’s reaction appeared to be the exception rather than the rule. Meghan was “not sure” if a male coach she was coached by knew that there were lesbians on the team but perceived that “he didn’t have any problem with it at all and recalled “if anything he was always trying to pick up the players!” The other participants perceived that male coaches “didn’t treat them (lesbians) any differently,” “didn’t have any problem

with it (lesbian sexuality) at all," "didn't care because it (lesbian sexuality) wasn't a big issue for them" or that "sexuality is not that big a deal for them."

The two male coaches I've had, since I've come out to myself, have been in the summer program [...]. (One coach) has dealt with hundreds of lesbians and he's known about all of them, I'm sure. And he's just really easy, you know? You're their to play (sport) and if you're a good person he'll accept you. There are some straight players that he doesn't like and there are some gay players that he doesn't like but he doesn't discriminate. He doesn't make underhanded homophobic comments. (Aoife, p.44a)

Another described how her male coach openly addressed the issue of sexual diversity on her team during a road trip:

He said "now look, probably half of you are lesbians on this team, half of you are not. I don't know for sure and I don't care. You're all athletes on a team," and he said "as far as I'm concerned [...] there shouldn't be any issues with any of you towards each other. So I don't want any cliques and I just want you to be open with each other and enjoy each other's company. (Heidi, p.44)

Although, this participant described his attitude as a "wonderful and great approach," she indicated that based on her experience and the experience of others she has known, female coaches show more support for lesbian athletes. Another participant also felt that "female coaches react a lot better," while another felt that although having a woman coach was not always a "positive thing" for her, having more women coaches would be "really important as far as accepting goes." It was ironic that mostly all of the participants elite sporting careers were dominated by women coaches yet many of them reported that their experiences were less than favourable when their female coaches were confronted with issues of lesbian sexuality. Both coaches and teammates played a dominant role in maintaining a homophobic environment because they did not affirm lesbian sexuality.

Another group of individuals, who interacted with the athletes at a micro level, contributed towards maintaining a homophobic environment; friends, family and colleagues. All the participants commented on how the attitudes of these individuals towards lesbians effected them as lesbians. Many of these attitudes were experienced outside the context of sport, however, some participants recalled how comments about lesbians within, and specific to the context of sport were often made:

The boyfriend entourage that hung around when we played, the hangers on, they were pretty negative about that kind of thing (lesbian sexuality). They didn't hesitate to make negative comments which really did *a lot* (laughs) for how I felt about things. Like they were quite negative (and) if they weren't always negative they were never positive. (Sandra, p.22)

Some of the individuals that were most significant to these athletes in their lives in sport affected what experiences the participants had, how they managed their lesbian identities, the meaning they gave to their lesbian sexuality and the prominence it was allowed to play in their lives. In the participants accounts it was apparent that sport was a central focus of their lives. In their early sports participation these athletes did not identify as lesbian but as they got older and embarked on their sports careers they were all conscious of their developing identities as lesbians. They were aware that at the micro level, through their interactions with coaches and teammates in particular, that the institution of sport did not welcome lesbians. Consequently, none of them wanted to "jeopardize (their) sport career in any way." This ultimately affected their lives as lesbians in their sports, how they interpreted the sports world, and ultimately how they reflected on their individual lives as lesbians in sport. As the participants pursued their sports goals they were acutely aware of the structure and the stakeholders in

sport which maintained heterosexism and homophobia and the impact that in their pursuit of an open and accepting sports environment.

Sport - The Continuum of Lesbian Athletes Experiences

Given that sport was not always a space that was welcoming to lesbian athletes, the remainder of Chapter Four documents the everyday experiences and negotiations these lesbians described that were part of their lives in the sports world. This section will illustrate the range of experiences described by the participants. In the interviews I did not ask the participants specifically to identify either the positive or negative conditions that they had experienced in sport. I simply asked them to tell me "stories" about being a lesbian in sport. In most of the stories they told me they did not paint a picture of their sports environments as being always unconditionally accepting and affirming of their lesbian sexuality. However, their accounts described a range of experiences, sometimes where lesbians and lesbian issues were treated positively or where lesbians and lesbian issues were treated more negatively. The experiences they identified are described on a continuum from their most positive to their most negative experiences in sport. I arranged the descriptions of their experiences into the following themes; Openness and Acceptance, Support, Tolerance, Discomfort, Assumptions and Sanctioning of Heterosexuality, Pathologizing Lesbian Sexuality, and Confrontations.

Openness and Acceptance of Sexual Diversity

Some participants reported hearing others say, "it doesn't really matter if someone is gay or not!"

It doesn't really seem to matter to some people. They're the people that are there to play, and if you make (the play), you're all right.

[...]. People that I have a more personal relationship with are pretty much very accepting. (Aoife, p.30a)

Generally on their teams which were predominantly heterosexual lesbian sexuality was not talked about, however, some participants did report that they did experienced a degree of openness and acceptance of lesbians. One participant heard other individuals say “there was nothing wrong with (lesbians)” or that being a lesbian did “not change who you were.”

I found out later that there’s a *lot* of people who knew (I was queer). It didn’t change how they saw me which proves that if someone is a little open minded that it doesn’t really matter. (Dara, p.39a)

Both Dara and Heidi commented that they were often asked about their ‘girlfriends’ and other aspects of their lives. Dara “really came out to everybody” when one of her relationships ended. Subsequently, her peers knew her next partner, knew they were living together and were “really cool” about the situation. In addition her colleagues in sport asked lots of questions about her life and it was their willingness to ask questions which gave her the opportunity to educate them on sexual diversity. She often arranged games between the “straight” team and the “gay” team she coached and recalled her “straight” teammates reaction:

We’d play my (gay and lesbian) team but I would play on the women’s team. They all knew I coached (the gay and lesbian team) and they started saying (to me), “these guys are really nice. They’re the nicest team we play.” Then we started talking about (gay) stuff (and) my coaches talked to (my friend) and I about what it was like being out, they asked us questions like “why do you have a Gay Games? (p.21a)

Meghan developed a “really strong friendship” with her teams’ manager because she had told her manager “right up front” that she was a lesbian. Consequently, Meghan felt could be “*very* open (with her manager) and tell her

everything and anything." In addition, her manager became a "really positive person in terms of accepting and not judging" Meghan's sexuality:

I feel I can be so open about (being lesbian) and talk about - like the other night [...] someone tried to pick me up at the bar and I told her the situation. I thought it was really fun to be able to share that with her. She was also getting insight and I think she grows by it as well. All of a sudden she feels included. (pp.26, 42,45)

Tina remembered how one of her teammates put an arm around her while talking in front of their team, a team who had not been very accepting of Tina as a lesbian. The action of the teammate made Tina feel really good, and was something which she would always remember. Julie stated that "openness" was expected on one team she played on because her coach was 'out' as a lesbian. She stated that openness created a different atmosphere from other less accepting teams on which she participated.

Participants believed that individual homophobes were a minority on their teams. After an traumatic 'coming out' Aoife remembered that on her team, the following year, things were "a little different, everyone and everything seemed back to normal." After breaking up with her partner Heidi also recalled feeling accepted because her peers empathized with her trauma. She described how diversity was viewed among her teammates:

P: On my first university team there was this potential for backstabbing. When I went to (my second university team) it was *totally* the reverse and I thought it was a mature attitude, a more accepting attitude amongst the players. I would say more players on the team at (this university) were gay and yet the intermingling was much more apparent. You weren't either straight or gay at polar opposites of the spectrum, you were sort of enmeshing, enmeshed all the time, socially, athletically. It was very much more cohesive.

I: You were a player first?

P: Exactly! Sexual identity second or third which was really wonderful because it became a more *normal* quality about someone, or trait or identity, almost became a non-issue.

I: That's a good thing in a way because when not such a big deal is made, it makes women who are gay more comfortable?

P: Far more! (pp.20-21)

Heidi assumed that everybody on her team, and in her sport knew about her lesbian relationship. She said that people expected her to show up with her partner at competitions and that her peers, "straight teammates as well as gay" would ask after her partner, she found this very validating. She was aware that teammates "talk behind other people's backs" but remarked that if her teammates "thought negatively about (her) they kept it to themselves, they just never did it to (her) face." Consequently, disrespect was not apparent to her. Heidi also reflected on an experience that she had while participating in the Gay Games in her home city. Throughout she had successfully managed to escape recognition and public disclosure by avoiding television cameras and 'straight' faces in the crowd. Ironically, having remained incognito, the finals of her event were judged by a local 'straight' colleague. She recalled his reaction:

P: I just cracked up (laughs) when I saw him and he saw me and I said 'oh my god! Hi, how are you?'

I: Did you get any backlash from him?

P: Not at all. He smiled! And I said (to him), "I hope you understand about my concern based on the stigma that could be attached to this?" And he was excellent. He said "no problem at all." He was great. (pp.35-36)

When others were accepting and open to sexual diversity these athletes perceived that their lesbian lives were validated and supported.

Support

In addition to being open and accepting some participants felt that their teammates supported and respected what they were doing with their lives.

I: You said that when you came to (this city) first that one of the other lesbians on the team took you under her wing so you really felt a kind of support? Gradually did you feel you were getting support from other players on the team? You talked about breaking up with someone?

P: Yeah. When I told them they were really concerned. [...]. One player came over and we talked and chatted about it. She asked me how I was feeling, it was *really*, really surprising. It was something I didn't expect for her to be so concerned.

I: That must have been very affirming for you?

P: Yeah, it was nice, it was really nice. (Dara, p.41a)

Dara felt that, generally, her teammates had an understanding about "relationship problems," consequently, when her relationship ended they constantly "checked in" and "asked questions" which helped her cope with her loss. She felt that they cared about her life and were very supportive "even though they were straight!" Similarly, Heidi recalled how "the straight world and the gay world came together to express their condolences" when her relationship ended. Both these women described the support they received as "amazing," "it really shocked (them)" and was something they would have never expected."

Heidi found sport a release because she assumed that people in her sport knew or presumed she was gay. She felt that as a collective group they were supportive and shared "valuable" experiences, something which she found "energizing" and "incredibly validating." She recollected first 'coming out' into her sports environment:

I knew (my partner and I) had this incredible connection through this sport that could be validated. There's quite a community of athletes that if they're not gay, then there are certainly players that respect relationships between same-sex individuals. And in (our sport) even though in some areas there was a stereotype that some of the heterosexual players tried to disregard and negate. There were a lot that said "heh, you're who you are, enjoy, you seem really happy together, go for it!" (p.17)

Later she added:

I believe that on the field there was a carry over, the attitude expressed on the field was very much a respectful one and really trying to encourage everyone to be their best. Not only as an athlete but to be self-driven. Like to do you best, "break through the mental barriers and play well because if you play well our team plays better." I think there was a carry over of that kind of attitude on the field to off the field more so than not by the straight players towards the gay and vice-versa as opposed to being unsupportive. (p.23)

Aoife felt the same support when she disclosed that she was lesbian to her coach.

She needed someone to turn to after having had a "traumatic" first relationship with another player:

I came out to her (coach) so she knows. She seemed very accepting. She encouraged me to play [...] and get myself into a space where I could feel comfortable in and I will always remember being able to tell her that." (pp.21-22a)

The support which some of these athletes experienced often led them to believe that they would be accepted in the predominantly heterosexual culture of sport as individuals who "just happened to be lesbians!" Some athletes said that they were never in a situation where one person said, "you're gay, I just can't deal with that, forget it!" For some it never came to that which was something they appreciated, many felt that they had been lucky because they knew that discrimination often happened in "terrible, terrible ways."

When I wasn't out in (my home city), like I never had a really bad experience. Like I've never had anybody in sport like really abuse me and call me "dyke." Like "what to fuck are you doing, blah,

blah, blah or anything like that. I think I've been quite lucky but I think it happens. In sport, in any job that I've ever done (I haven't had people) shying away from me because I'm queer. And I think I've been really, really lucky in that way. (Dara, pp.56-57a)

However, not all these athletes' experiences in sport were always absolutely positive. More often in the interviews they described experiences where they definitely did not feel supported or accepted as lesbians. When I asked them to describe what it was like to be a lesbian in sport, overwhelmingly, they began to tell me stories about some of the more negative attitudes and behaviours they had experienced or observed as lesbians. Sandra stated:

You would think a lot of teams would be a kind of haven. That there would be a lot more people accepting of *that* kind of thing. But, you know, it could have been way better for us, it really could've, you know? I think we made things harder on ourselves, I *really* do. But it could've been a much more positive experience for us, you would think that it would have been.

I know people must look at it and say, "oh it's ideal," you know, "you're on a sports team. Isn't that what *you* guys like?" But you know what I mean? It just *wasn't* as positive as it could've been. And I say that at the same time as saying it was one of the *best* times that I ever had. It was wonderful. But it could have been more positive! (p.28)

The rest of this chapter documents the participants descriptions of the more negative and insidious aspects of their sports experiences as lesbians, and the strategies they used to deal with these attitudes in sport. These stories and incidences form the majority of their experiences as lesbians in their elite sports.

Tolerance

Kelly remarked that her teammates could "handle (lesbians) really well" and "don't treat her any differently at all" (p.8a). However, tolerance was not uniformly experienced by all participants. Aoife remarked that she was "pretty well *just* tolerated by a couple of (her teammates)" and that varied from team to team. Those

that did experience tolerance perceived that it manifested itself in an “you’re okay even though you’re a lesbian” attitude. Aoife recalled that some heterosexual players “reached a level of tolerance” for some lesbians but not for others. I asked her to comment on ‘why’ these two levels of differentiation occurred. She stated that a level of tolerance usually occurred when teammates thought someone was “a good enough player” to be accepted *even though* she might be a lesbian. Her theory came from observing her teammates choose the “less attractive (lesbians), the ones that fit the stereotype to talk about” (p.41a). Consequently, she recalled that those who “predominantly had *really* short hair and aren’t classified as attractive” were treated differently than those who were “just” tolerated. I asked another participant about these patterns of tolerance:

I: Do you think it’s changing a bit? People who assume you’re gay now say, “well, she’s a really good hockey player and works hard, what *if* she’s gay?”

P: I think so. I think so. It’s like, “well what if she’s gay? So what! You know she’s a nice person!” (Tina, p.16)

Often tolerance was only exhibited when the participants were not explicitly ‘out’ as lesbians or did not “flaunt” their lesbian sexuality. Dara stated that on her former partner’s national team:

The (heterosexual) women are fine with (my ex-partner) and fine with the other one or two players that have come and gone on the team who were queer, and *not* out. (p.12a)

When Aoife stated that some “straight people tolerate me and some of them are great” it was obvious that tolerance to her was not a positive experience. It was condescending and implied that lesbians were only to be tolerated when it was convenient or when their ‘face fit.’ When lesbians were not tolerated in sports the participants described that other behaviours and attitudes were manifested.

Avoidance

Most of these athletes described that their coaches, teammates and others in sport were often uncomfortable with lesbians and lesbian issues. They perceived sports people were "not as comfortable" with lesbians as they were with heterosexuals, and that most of them would have "a hard time dealing with (lesbians)." Others were often "threatened," "afraid" and "worried" about the possible existence of lesbians close to them. Consequently, lesbians were physically avoided or lesbian issues were not addressed.

Physical avoidance occurred when these lesbian athletes were in close quarters, in hotels or locker rooms, with other team members. Aoife remembered that her teammates were "really reluctant to be in the same room alone with me" when they discovered she was a lesbian. Kelly's teammates were often warned to "stay away" from suspected lesbians, consequently, she perceived that they would "avoid (her) a little" and "wouldn't associate themselves with (her) anymore" if they knew she was lesbian (p.20a). Aoife labeled this physical avoidance "the locker room effect:"

No one wants to change (in the locker room). I mean you're always showering together and when I had my relationship with my first partner I didn't all of a sudden think, "oh, I can't wait to shower with the team (laughs)! That's not what happened at all. I mean that's got nothing to do with it, "I'm not interested in you!" They have a hard time getting over that! (pp.47-48a)

Kelly's account echoed this point when she described her teammates behaviour:

Like in the shower, they'd all shower up quickly and leave if a couple of the (lesbian) girls were in the shower. (p.8a)

In a second interview she added:

You knew they weren't really comfortable with themselves. They wouldn't express it but deep down they would kind of stay away,

especially in the shower. You can tell by who would take a shower and who wouldn't. (pp.3-4b)

The participants remarked that lesbians and lesbian issues were often verbally avoided. Their sports colleagues gave the impression that they did not want to hear about or discuss lesbians. Participants commented that discomfort was often reflected when "something was not said" or in an "unspoken tension" that surfaced when lesbian topics were mentioned. Heidi was aware that there were "certain things" she could not talk about and, in general, there were certainly "no serious political discussions" about lesbian issues in her sports. Dara stated:

With the straight all women's team that I was on, it wasn't talked about. (p.7b)

I asked Heidi about the "everybody knows (there are lesbians in sport) but nobody says anything" syndrome described by Griffin (1992). She stated that although disrespect was not explicitly evident "lesbian sexuality was never talked about" openly on her team. Similarly, Meghan commented that she never really knew whether the heterosexual players knew she was a lesbian because "nobody's ever asked (her) if (she) was." In addition, Julie commented that even when it was known that her two coaches were lesbian there still was a lack of verbal comfort with addressing the issue:

Nobody talked about their relationship openly. [...]. *Nobody* talked about it. We just knew, "oh yeah, they're together." (p.6)

Verbal avoidance was best illustrated in Dara's description of her team's reaction to what she described as a particularly "hateful and homophobic comment." When someone on her team wished "a whole bunch of fags" were killed, she remembered how:

I just stood there. I turned around and kind of looked at everybody. And nobody blinked an eye, or *anything*. They just kind of didn't say anything or acknowledge what she said. They just kind of kept doing what they were doing (p.32a)

As stated there was rarely "massive discussions" about lesbians, generally, the participants reported that people "never really said anything" although, Dara figured that "enough of (the team) knew (she was lesbian) just because of conversations they *didn't* have!" She commented:

Like with me on the team, I wasn't out. I wasn't really seeing anybody at the time, I don't think. I was just actually starting to come out when I was managing the team and no-one really asked me. They asked me to do things with them and I either said 'yes' or 'no' but they didn't ask me about what I was *just* doing. Like "what did you do this weekend? Where did you go?" They never asked me those sorts of things because either they knew and didn't want to ask me or they didn't *want* to know. (pp.52-53a)

Physical and verbal avoidance of lesbians and lesbian issues were passive manifestations homophobic attitudes and behaviours. As the athletes continued to describe their experiences they also identified more explicit acts of anti-lesbian attitudes and behaviours. The fulcrum of these more negative manifestations was the explicit and persistent assumptions of heterosexuality demonstrated in their sports which established the perception that lesbian sexuality would not be tolerated.

Assumptions and Sanctioning of Heterosexuality

The participants reported that it was rare for lesbians to receive positive acknowledgement in their sporting environments, that within the "heterosexual domain" of their teams there was little open recognition and affirmation of lesbians. In their sports environments it was assumed that everyone was heterosexual unless 'suspected' otherwise. Kelly's teammates "didn't think it was possible" for her to

be a lesbian because she was so young, while Dara described her peers regularly stated in her company:

Well, [...] I don't think I know any gay people (p.25a)

Dara declared that "most people in this world assume heterosexuality and assume everybody's straight" (p.5b), therefore, in situations where their lesbian sexuality was not known others assumed that the participants were leading heterosexual lives. Consequently, they were often asked, "do you have a boyfriend?" Or "when are you going to get married?" Heidi recalled:

(My colleague said) "oh, I'm trying to hook you up with John this Friday, will you go out with him? And I'd say, "no, I've got other plans." "Well who are you going to be with?" "A friend." "Oh *really?*" Some people guessed I'm sure. And other people were wondering why I wasn't dating. (p.12)

Heidi also commented that her colleagues "still refer to my boyfriend" and ask "if I'm going to see my boyfriend this weekend?" Sandra described her teammates reactions to her lesbian sexuality after assuming she was heterosexual:

Women who played with us, you know, who were really close to us, did a lot of things socially with us, they didn't know. When they found out they were like "okay, that makes sense." [...]. But at first it was, "*really*, with who? Who were you with?" Come on! (bangs the table) Smell the coffee! (laughter) (p.11)

Even when some 'came out,' a common reaction of friends was to ask if their relationship was like "girlfriend/boyfriend?"

In addition to heterosexual assumptions participants talked about how heterosexuality was sanctioned as the norm, heterosexuality was constantly valorized. From an early age many knew that talking about "homosexuality" was outlawed and persistent questions about "boyfriends" conveyed an expectation of

heterosexuality. Kelly told me that once she mentioned a male friend, a “fear” that she might be lesbian dissipated:

P: I constantly had people ask me like, do you have a boyfriend yet? Because people in my home town have heard rumors (about me being lesbian).

I: So do you think they equate having a boyfriend then with you certainly being safe?

P: Yeah. Like recently, I was just on campus and I was talking to a couple of my friends from (home) and they had *definitely* heard all the rumors especially (because of) who I’m living with, they associate me with her. They figure “you must be!” I was talking to them and I said “well I have to go, I’m expecting a call” and they just kind of assumed that it was a guy. And it *did* happen to be a male friend of mine and so they got all excited. You know? Happy, they just thought it was *great*. (pp.16-17a)

Having ‘a man’ indicated that individuals ‘were safe’ and their heterosexuality could be validated. The participants recognized that this validation was much more evident in the social support for heterosexual players. Aoife described the social sanctioning of her heterosexual teammates lives:

The straightness of (my university), it was always there, always in your face, especially on the team. Everyone talked about boyfriends and laughed, joked, and teased when a new fellow appeared at the game. No one ever did that when a woman came to watch me even though they knew *exactly* what she was there for (p.1b)

As a consequence of this sanctioning heterosexuals teammates were defensive about their heterosexuality. Aoife described that her teammates were “always talking about men and trying to pretend they’re straight” (p.29a). This sanctioning was not exclusive to teammates. Sandra recalled that:

With every woman coach you’re not going to find someone who is going to make young lesbians feel comfortable or feel good about themselves, you know? (My coach) sure didn’t go out of her way to do that in my last year playing. I mean she’s the best coach I ever had and she’s done very good things with the programme. But you know, personally, I mean she didn’t make me feel any more

comfortable than any of the other ones did. In fact, some of her comments - I mean the first thing I found out about her was just how much she enjoyed making people know on the team that she wasn't lesbian. And in no uncertain terms! You know, stuff like "hello, I've been sleeping with _____. (p.30)

Ironically, despite assumptions of (global) heterosexuality in sport the participants also knew that there was an awareness that, in reality, everyone was not heterosexual, that there were lesbians in sport. Given that awareness others valorized and 'flaunted' their heterosexuality to repel rumors that they might be lesbian. As heterosexuality was valorized as the 'norm,' any diversity from that standard was often perceived as unacceptable and deviant.

Pathologizing Lesbian Sexuality

The sanctioning of heterosexuality reinforced for these athletes that lesbian sexuality was not considered normal. Despite the fact that 'homosexuality' was eliminated as a "mental disorder" from the American Psychological Association's Diagnostic Statistics Manual (DSM) in 1973 many people still considered it both a sickness and a deviance.

(I was) watching the news one night with my dad. [...]. There was something about gay or lesbian activists on T.V. and he said "when you get out there, be careful. There's a *lot* of them out there. You don't want to get caught up in that! Stay away from that *kind* of thing!" And at that time I was already sleeping with my teacher! (Kelly, pp.15-16a)

Sandra remembered books around her house entitled 'Those Unhappy Gays.' These religious books certainly gave her the "hint" at a very young age that lesbian sexuality would not be approved of in her household, and would be viewed as morally wrong. As she got older she became more aware that lesbians were perceived as moral deviants. She recalled her former partner's ex-boyfriend telling

her that her relationship with his ex-girlfriend was “abnormal and unnatural” (p.23). Kelly reinforced this notion when she commented that “straight people perceive gay as being abnormal, not normal” (p.38a). An experience that Aoife had illustrated this disturbing trend of pathologizing lesbian sexuality. She described ‘coming out’ to her closet friend, a teammate who she hoped to receive emotional support, however, she realized immediately that being lesbian was not something her friend would accept. Indeed being lesbian immediately thrust Aoife outside the realm of sanity in her friends opinion:

It was a really hard time for me and I thought she would be there for me and I said, “you know, I’m lesbian.” And she said “*what did you say?*” I said, “I’m gay, I’m lesbian.” And she said “oh, I’m shocked! I’m horrified! Oh my god, I can’t believe it!” Her head was in her hands and she just kind of got up and walked away. She said “well, you can’t justify yourself, you can’t explain this, can you? It’s *all* mental.” (pp.14-16a)

Another participant commented that because lesbians were considered deviant they were often subjected to “absolute chastising” and were “always scorned” in her sport. Others told me that they had overhead conversations in which lesbian sexuality was referred to as “such a disgusting thing” and “it’s sick.” In numerous conversations when the “topic of the day” was “who was and who wasn’t (lesbian), there was a “rolling of eyes,” “groans of disgust” and statements like “oh god!” Lesbian sexuality was not perceived as normal:

I imagine some girls kind of joke about it. Like my roommate had gone to the bar with (the team) and actually my partner had just got back from training so I spent the time with her. And one of the girls said to (my roommate), “oh, we don’t want you to go back to *that!* You can come and stay out late.” I don’t know what she meant but I always - the first impression that I always get is oh, you know, they think it’s dirty and gross, and everything. (Tina, p.12)

Julie was told by her family she was “living this big, bad, horrible life” (p.17). In her household lesbian sexuality was viewed as a sickness something that her father thought her could cure by “injecting (her) with hormones” (p.5). Pathologizing and making moral judgments about the rightness of heterosexuality and the ‘wrongness’ of lesbian sexuality establishes lesbians as outside the norm, “the other.”

Consequently, participants suggested that their sports colleagues believed they had a “skill” in recognizing lesbians.

I think everybody on the team knew or seemed to know who was not (lesbian).” (Heidi, p.27)

Recognizing “who was and who wasn’t lesbian” reinforced for these athletes the idea that lesbians were viewed as “different.” To be defined quite literally as “*those* kind of people” or “*that* type of woman” conveyed the message that only heterosexuals were accepted. The following extract from one interview highlights others’ perceptions of lesbian “differentness:”

P: (Being a lesbian) hasn’t affected my field hockey. It’s just me, same but different.

I: What do you think of the attitude, you know, “well you’re still a good player *even though* you’re a lesbian?

P: I know! “Well what did you think was going to happen? Like “both my arms are going to fall off! And I won’t be able to play anymore!” (Aoife, p.46a)

Heterosexual assumptions, the social sanctioning of heterosexuality as the norm and pathologizing lesbian sexuality are key aspects of heterosexism and contribute to the perception of lesbian sexuality as deviant. Despite liberal affirmations of “lifestyle” choices which were voiced in other environments participants often experienced contrary attitudes in their sporting environments.

Confrontations

These contrary attitudes were often manifested in ‘confrontations.’ Lesbians or lesbian issues were *not* always avoided because, as Meghan recalled, often “everybody was talking about “homosexuality.” In this theme of confrontations there was again a range of ‘confrontations’ against lesbians; speculation, stereotyping, disassociation, differential treatment, and explicit attacks.

Heidi recalled that her teammates would “think out loudly,” “oh god this is (lesbianism) becoming pervasive.” Ironically, despite assumptions of heterosexuality, many heterosexuals in sport believe they are surrounded by lesbians. Part of the tension created in sport comes from people speculating that lesbian sexuality is rife in sports. People speculated and spread rumors about ‘who was and who wasn’t lesbian’ on their own teams or on opposition teams.

I was told right of the bat, as soon as I made the provincial team - I think it’s something that all the new little people get told. Like “so and so’s a dyke, so and so’s a dyke. And so is she, and so is she. And she’s living with her. I got all this information and some of it was lies. [...]. Total gossip! (Aoife, pp.10-11a)

Rumor-mongering indicated that lesbians would not be accepted as speculation was rarely followed by positive comments, in addition, certain individuals and teams become “renowned as being mainly gay.”

My high school teacher - I told her I was going to (university) and she said “well I guess we should tell you then that the coach and the assistant coach are sleeping together. And the coach always has members of the team come over and stay at her house.” [...]. And I went (to university) of course and found out that it was all lies. (Aoife, pp.11-12a)

Sometimes the participants themselves were ‘under suspicion’ while at other times they observed how others were put under suspicion:

(My teammates) mostly know who is and who isn't on the team. One incident came up where the straight girls were sitting around and discussing who was and they pretty much picked everybody. But when they came to me they didn't think I was. (Kelly, p.7a)

Some participants recalled asking themselves, "how do these people know? Many had "no idea" and did not "understand" how these rumors spread. Part of the speculation involved a 'law of association,' if someone knew or socialized with lesbians then *they* were considered to be lesbian too.

We heard later what people said about us, you know? That "you're all a bunch of lesbians because you play for one. "You must be of course! (Sandra, p.15)

When Aoife told her coach and her best friend, a teammate, that she was a lesbian she commented that "by the end of the summer everybody knew" but she never discovered "who did the talking." Similarly Dara commented:

I found out later that there's a lot of people who knew about me - not through sports but who knew from other people. Like from work and stuff like that - knew that I was queer. You know? I didn't tell them! And they're like "oh yeah! (They) found out from somebody else or somebody told them." (p.39a)

Rumors were often spread maliciously without any recognition of the consequences for the "suspects." Negative gossip and speculation flourished especially if individuals fit a lesbian stereotype.

In order to be identified as "the other" lesbians have to be recognized as different. In order to magnify lesbian 'differentness' from heterosexuality many participants identified that stereotypical beliefs of lesbians were prevalent in sport:

(The) lesbian stereotype, as perceived by straight people in my experience - I don't believe in the lesbian stereotype - (is someone with) short hair, doc's (shoes), softball player, aggressive, not attractive to men, no make-up. (Aoife, pp.1-2a)

Furthermore, this participant remembered a group of players being identified “so obviously as dykes” because they were wearing “black leather with chrome zippers!” Dara commented that in sport “it is assumed that people who look ‘dykey’ are dykes.” Heidi’s account reinforced this notion of how others identified potential lesbians:

There were a core of women who were very protective of their own identity, sexual identity. To a point where they would blurt, out on many occasions - how so and so from whatever team - “gosh, she looks so gay.” You know? “Look at the hair cut, look at the size of her, look at the way she walks” (p.19)

In sport “everyone’s impression is that all lesbians have short hair” or that lesbians are “rough or boyish.” A definite stereotype was that all lesbians are “butch:”

P: Like often I hear that from my friends (teammates), just in situations they say “wow butch!” We were at a bar and I was with a friend and we walked by a table and she said “oh, dykes!” There was four women sitting there and I was like “maybe?” You know?

I: Do you think there is a stereotype then?

P: Uh-huh, definitely. I’m sure they don’t think that, you know, a dyke is a beautiful, feminine women. They associate rougher looking women, moustaches or really short spiked hair. There is definitely a stereotype. [...]. I’m sure if they saw four really feminine women sitting at the table they wouldn’t say the same thing. Even though all four of them could be....

I: ‘Lipstick lesbians?’

P: Yes. (laughs) ‘Lipstick lesbians!’ (Kelly, pp.32-33a)

Stereotypical beliefs about lesbian behaviour also existed. Many of their teammates believed they “had such a big understanding of it (lesbian sexuality), they “thought they knew everything about it” and could describe *exactly* “what” they thought lesbians did. Aoife remembered teammates saying with “authority” that “one plays the man and one plays the woman.” Ironically, she added that her

teammates equated lesbians with radical feminists and man-haters. The stereotype of lesbians both ‘wanting to be like men’ and ‘hating men’ often confused her.

Behavioral stereotyping focussed on the perceived importance of the sexual aspect of lesbian sexuality. The participants observed that often derogatory comments were directed towards lesbian ‘sex.’ Teammates often made subtle sexualized comments about lesbians in the shower room:

I wasn’t around but (my roommate) said that (the team) were having showers [...] and someone dropped the soap and (one) girl said “oh too bad she (the lesbian) wasn’t there!” (Tina, p.18)

Participants were extremely aware of these behavioral stereotypes. Comments like “you’d better watch out you don’t drop the soap on that person” told them that lesbians were viewed as “voyeurs,” sexual maniacs.

People used to make comments about our coach. There were rumors going around that there had been something between (a player) and this coach. And with that, I think people’s first response was “I think you’d better watch your step around this coach!” (Sandra, p.14)

The presumption was that lesbians were waiting to pounce on unsuspecting heterosexuals at every moment. When teammates were really reluctant to be in the same room alone with Aoife, she felt like saying, “I’m not going to rape you!” Tina commented that her teammates probably thought she was going to try to “pick them up.” There is a belief that lesbians “flaunt” their sexuality and again this solidifies the myth that sex is central to “who lesbians are” and “what lesbians do.”

Another aspect of this behavioral stereotyping was described by some of the participants who are teachers. They stated that it had become “fashionable” and “trendy” in schools for children to use “stereotypical homophobic comments” to tease others inside and outside sport:

Every second word they call each other is "fag" or "that's gay." "I can't believe you did that, that was too gay." [...]. I don't remember people using that phrase when I was growing up. But I think it's something that came about saying "it's gay" to mean "it's stupid." I remember guys calling each other "fags" but that's been around for awhile. (Sandra, p.23)

Another teacher heard similar comments from her students:

"Oh, that's really gay!" Or he's gay, he's in ballet." "Barishnicoff, who cares. He might be a good athlete but he's gay!" (Heidi, p.39)

Physical and behavioral stereotypes established a "mind set" for what lesbians were supposed to "look like" and "what they do." Participants believed that promoting these stereotypical attitudes was a way that lesbians could be identified as different. As many participants were not explicitly 'out' as lesbians in their sports it was difficult to challenge and confront these stereotypes, therefore, myths are perpetuated.

Once a lesbian stereotype is established in their sports participants described how others endeavoured to protect themselves by making it explicitly clear that they were not lesbian. In addition to defending and sanctioning their heterosexuality participants observed others attempting to disassociate from the lesbian label, protecting themselves against something which was viewed as "less favourable."

One rather eccentric individual on our team, very outspoken, always playing up to the guys whenever she could and coiffing herself, would say the odd comment to another player. "Oh, look at her, she's pretty cute!" It would be a kind of an 'off the cuff' kind of comment. The same individual though would have real problems being identified as being on a team with a lot of gay athletes. So it's kind of a contradiction, a tremendous contradiction. (Heidi, pp.27-28)

The fear for many heterosexual teammates was being lesbian-bated:

I don't know whether it's paranoia but when we go into the dressing room - you know how girls are? They, you know, put their arm around each other or something like that? But right away they look

at you and they think, "oh god, if I do this does she think *I'm gay?*" Do you know what I mean? (Tina, p.11)

Participants acknowledged that this detachment from lesbians was exhibited by both heterosexual and lesbian teammates. Lesbian teammates attempted to disassociate themselves from other known or suspected lesbians, fearing they might be labeled. Some participants experienced a lack of support from these other lesbian athletes. Tina commented that she thought "our kind" were "supposed to stick together" (pp.14-15), however, in contrast she was "used" by other lesbians to deflect suspicion from themselves:

One of the girls on our team, she's gay, and she just came out with it and said to a couple of girls, "well (Tina) is gay and so is (her partner)." 'Cause she's been in the closet for such a long time I think she wanted to direct the attention of the issue towards (us) and not just herself because she's been the only one on the team. (p.9)

She recalled the lesbian players on her team pretending they were heterosexual by talking out loudly about men. She recalled they would say, "god, that guy's good looking," when they were really looking at his girlfriend:

It seems that there's a couple of them (lesbian players) that use (my partner) and I as a scapegoat. They lead a double life. [...]. They brought one of the straight girls over, that's fine, but you have to think of it, you know? Like I wasn't - I didn't want to deal with the questions like "oh, where do you sleep?" You know what I mean? I was asked by a couple of girls in my *own* home which really frustrated me. They can't use my partner and I as a scapegoat. (p.10)

Part of disassociating from lesbians was reflected in another aspect of 'Confrontations,' the differential treatment that lesbians experienced compared to heterosexuals. Some athletes stated that 'out' lesbians or 'suspected' lesbians were ostracized and their social lives were rarely validated. Dara recalled how comfort with, and recognition of lesbian relationships on her team was not the same as for

heterosexual relationships. Lesbian couples were invited to team parties, however, their relationships were not “as comfortable a thing” to acknowledge or were not “talked about quite as much” as the relationship between, for example, her male coach and his female partner.” Lesbians were often dealt with in a distinct way:

P: (Our coach) is very nice to all the boyfriends that come to watch the games and things like that.

I: Is she nice to the girlfriends?

P: No, no, she's not at all. Every time you go and talk to your partner or for that matter anybody that she knows is a lesbian, [...] you know, it's the best way to make sure you're going to get on the field. If the other dyke on our team wants to get on the field, if she hasn't been playing - she *never* gets to play - (the coach) is very discriminating against her. You should talk to her. She just has to wander over and start chatting to me and (the coach) will put her out on the field because she doesn't want her talking to me. So it's a sure way to get some attention from (the coach). (Aoife, p.27-28a)

This differential treatment sanctions heterosexuality and persists because heterosexism and homophobia are tolerated in their sports. Participants described that ‘differentiation’ flourished and allowed individuals to “exclude” lesbians or lesbian ‘suspects’ from their immediate social group. One woman recalled:

If we’re on trips and everybody says, “we’re getting up and going to the bar,” they invite everybody but they make it seem - when they ask the gay girls on the team - like they don’t want them to come. They ask them but it seems like they’re almost being polite (Kelly, p.11a)

Another aspect of differential treatment was the ‘right’ heterosexuals assumed they had to question the sexuality of ‘suspected’ individuals. Julie experienced this questioning from her family, they continual inquired about her teammates:

I come from an incredibly intensive Roman Catholic family. Profoundly homophobic parents. [...]. And I used to bring (my

sports) friends over. And they'd walk in the door and mom and dad would ask "are those lesbians?" (p.4)

Another participant experienced similar family interrogations:

My mother is always asking me about boyfriends. "Do you have one? Can I see a picture? When are you getting married? [...]. I think my brothers have an idea. (They're) *always* asking me if I have a boyfriend. It's a big concern for them. (Kelly, p.17b)

Sports colleagues and teammates were as explicit with their questioning. Julie recalled that she and her teammates were often asked "you guys are a bunch of dykes, aren't you?" While Aoife recalled:

I remember that she (a teammate) told me that she went to (a province's) room in the hotel and (a player from that province) led the onslaught. "So what's with (Aoife)? What's going on here? We heard such and such and so and so!" (p.42a)

Tina was asked by her teammates in her own home where she slept. These inquiries came about because she shared living space with a woman she was suspected to be in a relationship with. Similarly Kelly was a suspect:

I had a girl (teammate) sit down and ask me. She said "are you gay?" It just kind of blew me guard. (pp.11-12b)

Individuals who were not 'thought to be' lesbians or stereotyped as lesbians were not interrogated about their sexuality, that 'privilege' was given to lesbian 'suspects.' Having their sexuality questioned was something that all the participants either anticipated or experienced in their lives in sport.

The most explicit aspect of 'Confrontations' described by many participants was identified as more direct attacks towards lesbians and lesbian sexuality:

I feel that sometimes when the gay issue comes up, everyone cuts it down. (Tina, p.32)

'Confrontations' contrasts with the 'Avoidance' theme discussed previously. When the subject of 'lesbian sexuality' could not be avoided it was rarely accompanied by

affirming comments. Tina, who was ‘suspected’ of being a lesbian, told me that one of the first ‘confrontations’ she had was when teammate told her categorically that being a lesbian would precipitate a distinct change in their friendship. She stated:

Last year this girl came up to me - like I just came out of the closet two years ago - and she said “oh, I hear there’s a lot of rumors going on?” And I said “oh?” And she said “I hear you’re gay.” I said “oh really?” [...]. I handled it very calmly. I never really answered it. [...]. And she said “well, I just wanted to let you know that if you were, I’d treat you differently. I wouldn’t like you. You know?” And she left it at that. So that kind really woke me up, like “wow,” you know? (pp.8-9)

Aoife who ‘came out’ to her coach remarked that the initial support and acceptance she experienced decreased, instead her coach incessantly attacked lesbian sexuality in the following playing season. Her coach often reacted strongly to Aoife’s appearance if she dressed like a stereotypical lesbian:

I had a jean jacket on over top of a white T-shirt and my track pants. And I think I was wearing a baseball cap. And I came into her (my coach’s) vicinity. And she said “oh, you look like those women (lesbians) over there. Take your jacket off and your hat off, and spruce yourself up a bit.” The assistant coach was very good and she said to the coach “I hardly think that’s appropriate to say something like that.” And the coach said “well they look like hell, and I don’t want that type of woman reflected on our team.” (p.20a)

Aoife suggested that the coach’s “under-handed homophobic comments” always “imply that it (lesbian sexuality) is just not acceptable on our team.” She highlighted another incident where her coach openly vilified lesbian sexuality:

P: We had a team meeting at (a tournament), it was in the morning and two players hadn’t showed up to the team meeting yet. So (the coach) said “where are (those two players)?” And someone said “oh, the last time I saw them they were having an intimate breakfast together.” And (the coach) said “oh my goodness! Well, we can’t have any of *that* on this team!”

I: Are these two women involved?

P: No, not at all

I: It was just a joke?

P: It was just a joke! It was just that sort of thing. And things like that happen all the time. Like it's so common (p.23a)

Incidences of verbal bashing, whisper campaigns, homophobic jokes slurs, and derogatory comments were directed towards lesbian sexuality. One participant had to confront what she described as "openly, vocal homophobia," while all the participants talked about overhearing "condescending comments" about lesbians. When I asked some of them to describe these comments, generally, they referred to them as being very "anti-gay" and "destructive."

I think of the comments people make and how they react, jokes, slurs and things like that, you know? If you put your arm around somebody or make some kind of gesture of friendship with another girl, you know, "you're a lesbian." Or "les-be friends" jokes like that. Do you know what I mean? (Sandra, p.22)

Often sports people had "nothing to say but bad things" about lesbians, always with "negative connotations." Disrespectful comments often accompanied "gay jokes." These jokes vilified lesbians, most often were sexual in nature and usually 'played up' the stereotypical myths about lesbians being sex maniacs. Dropping the soap in the showers often heralded a plethora of gay jokes.

Participants often experienced an "intense reaction" towards lesbians and if lesbian topics were on the agenda Julie recalled that it created a "major turmoil, almost like World War III had erupted." Extreme animosity towards sexual diversity was salient in one participants account:

It was the time when there was that big earthquake in San Francisco? We were in the changing rooms, it was after practice. And someone was saying, "oh yeah, did you hear about the earthquake? It cut out the baseball game." And (another player) turned to whoever was talking and said, "do you know what I *really*

wish? I *really* wish there was a whole bunch of fags underneath that bridge and it came crashing down and killed them *all*." I could *not* believe that something so hateful would come out of somebody's mouth. (Dara, p.33a)

Some participants families also "lashed out with ongoing verbal assaults and homophobic stuff." In particular Julie described her father as "abusive" towards her lesbian sexuality. He would yell and scream that her sport was full of "god damn lesbians" (p.17). In another incident her brother verbally threatened her that he would "call the cops" because she was a lesbian. For this woman derogatory comments and offensive jokes were not subtle, she did not have to decode the under-lying message.

Several participants were cognizant that "gay-bashing" was a reality and that it clearly demonstrated disapproval of, and hatred towards lesbians and gay men. Although none of the participants observed or experienced physical bashing directly, Tina explained that she often felt physically threatened by a teammate. In addition to telling her that she "would not like her if she was gay," a teammate harassed her on the ice while playing:

She always takes cheap shots at me, like all the time. Like last year, when I was cutting across the goal she stuck her knee out. Ever since that day I hated her. [...]. She tried to kick at me and trip me. Like kicking (laughs). You know? And I'm cutting toward the net and she's still like really, you know, slashing me and everything? (p.38)

Tina reassured me that her teammate took "cheap shots" at everyone but she felt more harassed *because* she was a lesbian. Another participant also recalled an incident where at practice one day another player was "out to get me, to hit me for some reason" (Dara, p.22a). However, she did not attribute this physical harassment directly to homophobia. The explicit nature of direct 'attacks' on

lesbians and lesbian sexuality indicated to these athletes that their sexuality would not be affirmed in their environments. In addition to sanctioning heterosexuality as the norm these overt confrontations always implied that lesbian sexuality was abnormal, disgusting and morally wrong.

Generally, the participants confronted a range of experiences from openness to explicit homophobic attitudes and behaviours in their sporting environments. Although participants experienced positive attitudes, it was apparent from their stories that tolerance was often demonstrated on the condition that they were not explicit about being lesbian. They were aware that it was *not* always "okay" to be lesbian, that lesbian sexuality should not be "flaunted" or "talked about." They all observed or experienced the pathologizing of lesbian sexuality, avoidance of lesbians and lesbians issues, and confrontations towards lesbians. The explicit discrimination resulted in, as Aoife described, a "pretty poisonous environment" for lesbians in sport. In addition, they experienced heterosexual assumptions, valorizing and sanctioning of heterosexuality. However, there is also a perception that lesbians are everywhere in sports which allows for speculation and stereotyping to take place, generating homophobic discrimination towards lesbians. However, the athletes were also aware that the existence of lesbians in sport is also denied. Through these methods lesbian sexuality in sport is regulated, lesbians are identified and once suspected they are ostracized out of sport. Consequently, all the athletes described that it was sometimes necessary to assume a heterosexual image to remain safe, and in their sports. The mechanisms they used to manage their lesbian identities, and decrease the risk they perceived in being identified as lesbians will be discussed in the next section entitled, 'Lesbian Athletes Strategies.'

Sport - Lesbian Athletes Strategies

In the interviews I asked these lesbian athletes to describe their sports experiences, and given the “poisonous environment” that many of them described, how they coped with the discriminations that they confronted on a regular basis? What emerged from their stories was that the participants employed many strategies to cope with the attitudes and behaviours they experienced.

In my third year I was pretty much trying *not* to raise eyebrows. I wanted to get somewhere with (my sport) and I wanted to get somewhere with my team. I wanted to be accepted in this team. (My sport) was my only really personal space and I really wanted to feel very comfy and accepting and everything so I didn't bring any of my lesbianism into (my sport). (Aoife, pp.33-34a)

This section will describe the extent of the strategies these participants pursued to manage their own lesbian identities in sport. The participants have frequently; tried to “appear” heterosexual; changed their behaviours and conversation in order to deflect suspicion from themselves; compromised their feelings; or in contrast, taken risks to make their lesbian identity more visible. These coping strategies can be placed on a continuum from passing as heterosexual to being explicitly out. The strategies used depended on the risk they felt in being identified as lesbian in sport. The greater the risk the more ‘closeted’ the participants remained. I arranged their strategies into the following themes; retreating into sameness; silence; secrecy; withdrawal; reversing the tolerance; and risk-taking.

Retreating into Sameness

It has been suggested in previous literature that lesbians “pass” as heterosexuals to cope with the risks they perceive in being identified as lesbian

(Griffin, 1992b; Woods & Harbeck, 1992). In the interviews I carried out it was clear that this was also a process which was part of the lives of the participants. As lesbian athletes the participants have felt constrained to hide their sexual identity, “give the impression that (they) feel the same way as the predominantly heterosexual crowd, and that they are heterosexual. When teammates ridicule gay athletes Kelly described how she ‘retreated into sameness.’

In front of the other players, I don’t really say anything at all. I don’t. I’m *not* negative to the gay athletes. I *definitely* don’t try to be negative at all to them. Like I want to stay neutral, make it seem as if I’m *neutral* about the whole situation. ‘Cause I don’t want to be throwing digs about *them*, like the gay athletes, just to make others think that I’m not. I just like to stay as neutral as possible. (pp.21-22a)

In a second interview Kelly told me that she had joined a new team. They had heard rumors that she was a lesbian, consequently, she had to give them the impression that she was heterosexual. Kelly described her experience when she began playing for this team that was “*more* homophobic” than her previous team:

I had to pretend to them through my whole season, I had to prove to them that I was straight. My girlfriend is playing for this team and no-one had any idea about her, well not that she knew. But we wanted to play together and that was her team, and she wasn’t willing to leave it. I wanted to move on, so I did what I had to do to play (with her). (pp.4-5b)

Not all the participants were in situations where they had to “prove” they were heterosexual. However, at certain times in their lives they all actively suppressed the expression of their lesbian sexuality because they felt the “pressure to conform” to “appear like one of the crowd” and pass as heterosexual. Given the hostile sporting environment which they described, it is not surprising that they worked to conceal that they were lesbian.

I always had the collegiality and the warmth and companionship that I felt far more with my teammates, yet I was trying to do the socially acceptable ‘dating boys.’ I would really have rather been out in the playing fields rather than going on a date where I had to follow some socially prescribed ways of acting and behaving. (Heidi, p.10)

The conditions which caused the participants to ‘retreat into sameness’ were either self-motivated and proactive, where the participants made a conscious decision to deflect suspicion from themselves or they were responding and reacting to explicit homophobic comments or feelings expressed in their sporting environment. Comments such as “we’ll have none of those women (lesbians) on our team” influenced and pressurized some athletes to suppress disclosing their lesbian identity. Instead they reacted by hiding themselves and their reactions to explicitly hostile attitudes. Some strategies involved laughing at gay jokes, mentioning ‘straight’ social places, not confronting lesbian issues and being silent and secretive about being lesbian. Kelly commented:

If they (teammates) say a gay joke or something, I’ll laugh. (p.34a)

While Sandra explained:

Jokes and things, I can even remember *telling* them in first year. Amazing actually. But I do remember making comments and that kind of thing. I remember taking part in conversations speculating and not being really positive about it (lesbian sexuality). (pp.12,19)

Both these participants told me that they tried “not to get too heartily involved” with discussions that appeared “totally against it (lesbian sexuality)” or “make out that (they) were homophobic.” However, Sandra stated that when her team were speculating and spreading rumors about others being lesbian, she was “probably right in there (saying) ‘oh really, are you serious?’” In addition all the participants were aware of the lesbian stereotype and at times acted in such a way as to

completely distance themselves from the ‘lesbian image.’ Julie commented that because her team were “always scorned as lesbians,” she:

Went into a hyper-feminine mode on the national team. I think in response to a lot of what was happening, both in terms of sex and gender. (p.7)

Likewise Kelly recalled:

I don’t think there is a gay dress. I dress comfortable like an other athlete, I guess, sweats and a T-shirt but then again all the straight girls, they dress the same way. So I don’t know if I look gay to them, I don’t know if I look gay to anyone. (p.35a)

Another strategy used to retreat into sameness was stressing their interest in the opposite sex. Heidi achieved this through being non-committal about her partners’ gender when asked about her “pretty private life.”

(My colleagues) often refer to my boyfriend that I’m in a relationship with as opposed to my - you know - and me knowing it’s girlfriend. I just have to be aware of the one word (laughs) ‘girl’ or ‘boy!’ And it’s just very convenient for me to carry it on. And I don’t have to speak *specifically* about gender. I can say what ‘we’ did. Gender becomes - doesn’t really become necessary to refer to and it appeases them! (p.31)

The extent to which ‘retreating into sameness’ occurred was dependent on the amount of pressure the athletes felt at any given time to remain invisible as lesbians and appear heterosexual. Many participants talked about “doing the dating guys thing” to cover-up. Meghan recollected that after her first major crush on a female teammate she “kept seeing a whole bunch of different guys.” While Kelly stated that to disassociate herself from the lesbian label she often talked about male friends and explained her “act” involved:

Hanging around with a lot more male friends or just talking about (them). Like “I talked to this guy tonight” or “I’m going out with this guy.” (p.16a)

Tina took a more drastic measure to ‘retreat into sameness’ and ensure her credibility with her heterosexual peers:

I didn’t fit in with all those girls, that’s *big time*. I didn’t fit in because they all had boyfriends and I wasn’t seeing anyone. And in my first year of university, I was so pressured about everyone having boyfriends, everyone had sex, that I went and had sex with this guy, just to get that pressure off my back and what a stupid thing to do, you know? (p.47)

From their stories it was apparent that ‘retreating into sameness’ allowed some participants to pass as heterosexual and fulfill heterosexist assumptions while maintaining the secrecy of their sexual identity. Given their perceptions of their hostile environment many of these athletes had no other choice but to try at times to “appear like one of the crowd.”

Silence

Silence describes how participants stifled themselves in reaction to sudden confrontations about lesbian sexuality. Silence is a reactive strategy (B. Jackson, personal communication, January 15, 1995) which the participants used to cope with the “poisonous environment,” silence allowed some participants to maintain the cover of “sameness.” Tina described how this silence manifested itself:

The woman that helped me out (at home), started me weight-lifting, she was gay. I was hanging around with her all the time, we clicked, we were such good friends. And everyone was coming up to me and started asking me questions, “well, *is she gay?*” And I’m like, *totally* defensive. I’m like “I don’t know! And if she is I don’t want to be hanging around! (p.16)

This self-defensive silencing preserved her credibility with those who were making the inquiries. Other participants silenced themselves when they were faced with inquiries about their ‘significant others.’ Kelly stated that when people asked her who she was seeing romantically, “I tell them “no-one!” (p.17a). Tina felt that she

had to silence herself when talking about her partner in conversations with others. She explained, "when I talk about (my partner), I kinda like say (her) name quietly" (p.33). In the interview she indicated the process she goes through by actually whispering her partners' name, the murmur symbolically diminishing her partners' importance in her life.

Participants also remained reticent when specifically asked about their sexuality. When a teammate confronted Tina about her sexuality she "just let her keep talking and never really answered" (p.8). In the incident when teammates asked Tina where she slept in her own apartment, she recalled "side-stepping the question" (p.10). When Kelly was asked by a teammate was she gay, she chose not to 'come out:'

I didn't know what to say. I was just "umm, no!" And I said "I don't think that's any of your business anyway." And we just kind of laughed about it and went on with our conversation." (p.12b).

It was apparent from their stories that their self-silencing also ensued incidents of gay joke telling and any type of verbal gay bashing. When Kelly's teammates made "lesbian" jokes about dropping the soap in the showers and "laughed and joked with (her) about it but (she) didn't say anything at all" (p.8a). Later in the interview I asked her how she would respond in a situation if someone was to say in a derogatory way, "oh god, that's so gay?" She stated that if it was "just one comment, I won't say anything or I'll just laugh" (p.19a). Similarly, Dara said that "dropping the soap" comments were frequent at her practices and although she felt like challenging their comments she recalled that she "just sat there and didn't say anything" (p.26a).

Dara also felt compelled to listen in silence when she heard another player wish “a bunch of fags were killed” in an earthquake. She described to me how she stood initially almost frozen to the spot and when she looked around at the other players and realized that they were *not* making comments or responding, she “never said anything to (the player) about it” (p.32a). Meghan recalled an incident where some teammates were discussing “who was and who wasn’t lesbian” on her team and how “disgusting” they thought lesbian sexuality was. She remembered remaining silent and listening to what they were saying about others. Although Aoife thought it was ironic that her heterosexual teammates spent “hours bashing men,” she chose to be silent on those occasions, having “nothing to do with it.” Although most of her teammates knew at that time that she was lesbian, she felt that taking part in male bashing would confirm the stereotype of lesbians as man-haters. Even when Kelly was being offered contacts and resources in a lesbian community in the city she was moving to, she remembered reacting in such a way as to not explicitly confirm her sexuality, she remained non-committal about her sexuality.

Self-silencing was imposed by many participants when they were reacting to situations where their sexuality might have been questioned and where they anticipated a risk in being labeled lesbian.

Secrecy

Athletes also described having to be secretive about their sexuality. In contrast to silencing, secrecy was a proactive strategy (B. Jackson, personal communication, January 15, 1995) which the participants used to ensure they did “not make comments to identify themselves” as lesbians. Rather than trying to pass as heterosexual, secrecy involved strategizing to prevent others from seeing them as

lesbians. Although they appear similar, secrecy involved censoring information about their lives rather than explicitly pretending there were heterosexual. Griffin (1992b) labelled this subtle difference as “covering.” The following themes emerged in what I labelled secrecy; gathering information about others’ attitudes; planning how to respond to confrontations and discriminatory remarks; and limiting information about their lives.

In order to maintain secrecy some athletes developed the ability to constantly monitor others’ attitudes towards lesbian sexuality. When I asked Kelly what cues she looked for she explained:

I try to analyze and say, “well are they doing that to me? Are they going to be that way towards me?” I guess I just look for the initial reactions from people. (pp.11-12b).

Later she added:

I’m just seeing how people react, how it changes myself, how it changes my relationship with certain people, just trying to basically gather information. (p.21b)

Meghan also explained:

On tour we’d (my team) go for walks and stuff. And the straight players, they were making comments about this person and that person being gay. Like I just didn’t say anything. I just sort of listened and ah, at the time, you know, was absorbing it all, and thinking “oh my god, they don’t think I am. (p.24)

Dara recalled when she moved to a new city she had to begin to gather information about her new teammates’ attitudes towards her and about lesbian sexuality. Heidi also gathered information when her colleagues made comments that were “anti-gay.” This alerted her to their hostility and when they attempted to gain access and information to her “private life,” her previous monitoring allowed her to use language that she knew would “appease” them and which would keep her “private

life” a secret. When participants were not, to their knowledge, identified as lesbian by their peers, they gained access to conversations their teammates had about lesbians and allowed them to analyze the risks involved in being ‘out.’

Having observed the systemic reaction towards lesbian sexuality some participants planned how to maintain ‘secrecy.’ Aoife learned how to keep her feelings “under lock and key” as much as she could while Meghan “stuffed in her feelings.” These strategies helped them to avoid appearing perplexed when confronted with derogatory remarks. Planning for secrecy also described how the participants prepared themselves to regulate information about their lives. Kelly explained:

I’ve been here a full year and the friends I’ve made - I haven’t really talked with them much on the situation. I *don’t* bring it up. I don’t want to, you know, get anybody suspicious. (p.18a)

For Kelly planning for confrontations began early in her sports career. She recalled how she “used to think about women more and more” even before her first relationship yet at the same time she was constantly being asked why she was not “dating boys:”

I used the excuse that I’m more interested in sports. I’d say, “I’d probably want to go out and if I had a boyfriend, I’d probably want to beat him at this sport and beat him at that sport.” I always said, “(sport) is what interests me now!” (p.41a)

Kelly realized from an early age that she should stop thinking about the possibility of being gay because she was aware that it was not accepted in society. She “just pushed it aside” and kept her feelings towards women her secret.

Many participants were aware that as a result of heterosexism and homophobia that the subject of lesbian sexuality was viewed as a “taboo.” Consequently, they “suppressed” and “ignored” their feelings for women as a

strategy to maintain their secret lives. In addition to ‘suppressing’ their feelings participants prepared answers for those who inquired about their ‘secret’ life. Both Dara and Kelly indicated that they were ready to “make up” stories about their social lives because they were “not really comfortable” disclosing their sexuality:

A lot of friends ask me ah, where I’ve been going on the weekends. Ah, well I say “I go out to a friends place or to a party, or to a bar.” And they always say, “well *what* bar?” (laughs) Well I just kinda name one of the straight bars around and *hope* that *they* weren’t there (laughs). (Kelly, p.19a)

Part of planning also involved “turning off” their sensitivities to lesbian issues and even their own personal lives. Heidi explained that often on long road trips with the national team she would receive letters from her partner. However, she had to balance her feelings of being “touched” by her partners’ words with “shutting them off” in the hope that others on her team, particularly her coach, would not notice. Although she found this “very difficult” and was “not always too successful,” choosing *not* to talk about her partner maintained the secrecy in her life (p.27). Ironically, even in a climate where Heidi’s sexuality could be celebrated and affirmed at the Gay Games, she commented that it was still necessary for her to be secretive. She was on the organizing committee for the Games in her city but felt it was essential to conceal her identity because of the “tremendous stigma” attached to lesbian sexuality by the predominantly heterosexual society:

One of the stipulations that I gave was that my name not be used on *any* brochures or anything of that nature. So I was protective about my identity and I said, “on *no* pamphlets, *no* brochures, *nothing*.” Well, I ducked T.V. cameras all the time and I ducked reporters all the time at the Gay Games. (pp.34-35)

When I asked some other participants about a potential appearance in the Gay Games in their futures they retorted that keeping their identities a secret would involve *not* planning to participate in the Games, just yet.

In addition to planning for confrontations these women also limited information about their lives. Despite wanting to say, as Sandra recalled, "this is who I am" and "this is who I'm with," many of the participants felt compelled to guard their sexual identity. An essential part of limiting information was the participants' regulation of disclosing their lesbian identity. As stated previously in their lesbian biographies while they were participating in their major sport many of these women did not tell anybody that they were lesbian, and when I asked most of them did they "come out" in their sporting environments when they were first discovering their lesbian sexuality many replied categorically, "no!"

I: At the time you got involved, did you tell anyone else?

P: That I was experiencing this? *No.* It was all on my own.
(Meghan, p.18)

Similarly, Heidi recalled:

I didn't tell *anybody*. Nobody knew for sure about my relationship with her. [...]. I never spoke to anybody about it and neither did she (my partner). (p.15)

Several athletes did not want to "admit to other people" that they were lesbian because it was something that they felt they could not expose in their sport:

I talked to my other friends outside (my sport) and I said to them like, "I *can't* tell anybody on (my team), I *can't!*" (Dara, pp.15, 29a).

Further limiting of information about themselves was achieved by what they described as "hiding" and "pretending." In addition to remaining "closeted" some participants described that secrecy involved "protecting" their identity and "putting

up a front" to deflect suspicion from themselves. Sandra commented that she "got to be pretty good at the facade" by the end of her university sports career. The "facade" enabled her to mask her lesbian sexual identity. Similarly, Julie recalled how maintaining a facade involved remaining mute on the topic of lesbian sexuality:

We censored ourselves on lesbian stuff [...]. We didn't raise it as an issue. (p.28)

Being secretive was a strategy that the athletes used to cover-up their identities as lesbians in sport, it involved gathering information, planning for responses and limiting information about themselves in order to maintain a veil of secrecy over their lives.

Withdrawal

In contrast to passing and remaining silent and secretive about their lives, all of the participants indicated that they had, at times, withdrawn from both lesbian and sporting environments to avoid being labeled lesbian and to avoid openly homophobic attitudes. Unlike 'retreating into sameness' and 'silence,' being able to withdraw from a hostile situation involved the athletes assuming some control over what they were prepared to acknowledge about their lesbian identity or tolerate in their lives. The participants often used language which illustrated a "physical" withdrawal from situations. Meghan commented that despite her very strong feelings towards women she "*never* crossed over the line" to impose her feelings on others (p.7). She described "holding back her feelings" because she knew a homophobic society had rendered 'homosexuality' a "taboo." When they were *first* "coming out" as lesbians few participants physically sought out any lesbian support

neither did they venture into a lesbian community or seek out lesbian cultural events, such as the women's bar or Gay Pride marches:

(My partner and I) would talk about it a lot, you know? And wonder what kind of craziness we were involved in [...]. And didn't - as long as I was involved with this woman - we didn't really seek any kind of support in the community that was out there. (Sandra, p.9)

As many of the participants thought they "were the *only* ones" (lesbians), they initially kept very much to themselves because they did not envisage sharing their lesbian lives with anyone. Heidi recalled thinking "*maybe* there were other lesbians out there but we (partner and her) never interacted with them" (p.32).

In addition to physically steering clear from a lesbian community some participants abandoned their friends, social roots and decided to either move away from their home cities, cutting all ties with home.

I'm actually not out in (my home city) and that's probably why I left. (Dara, p.13a)

Later Dara added:

I just basically walked away from the city. Like I left for no really good reason - people, like most of my friends know *why* I left, probably because I could be more out (where I was going), and I had nothing left in (my home city). (p.37a)

Tina recalled really isolating herself from people, not letting them know anything about her lesbian life. When she was not playing on her team she stated that she did "things for (herself), kept to (herself) because (she) didn't want to bother anyone" (p.31). In order to stay away from those that created and maintained the "poisonous environment," therefore, she self-imposed isolation on herself. Dara also chose this withdrawal strategy when she opted not to try out for the national team. After hearing the "horror stories" about the treatment of lesbians by the national coach, she removed the dream of a national team place from her list of sporting goals.

The act of physically withdrawing was also used as a defense against more direct homophobic comments. After listening to a player “wish a whole bunch of fags were killed,” Dara recalled removing herself from the situation:

I just left. [...]. I *had* to leave. Like I left, I don’t know where I went, I just sat for awhile. And then I came back later and did whatever I had to finish doing. (pp.32-33a)

Aoife also commented that when her coach reprimanded her for looking like a lesbian she “just walked away” because “couldn’t handle it.” (p.20a). Many times she wanted to “stand up and walk out of the room” but stopped herself because she recalled “always getting so wishy-washy about it!” (p.25a).

As well as the heterosexual players avoiding the locker rooms some of the participants also physically avoided locker rooms and showers after games. The following accounts illustrate how these women coped with the “locker room effect.”

I would rarely shower because I just, you know, I just felt uncomfortable. (Kelly, p.4a)

Similarly, Aoife stated:

In my third year I remember just running off the field - like we had to have a shower altogether to get on the plane? And I would *sprint* off the field, throw my equipment in my bag. *Sprint* to the showers, and be out of there before the team had finished warming down so no-one had to deal with the stress of showering with me! (p.48a)

Tina stated that she *did* shower with the team but she withdrew her *gaze* from the other heterosexual players:

I do have a shower with the rest of the girls, the straight ones. And ah, none of them have nice bodies anyways! But that’s beside the point (laughter). But I don’t really stare at any of them. [...]. I don’t do *anything* out of the ordinary, I mean let them catch me looking at them or anything like that. (pp.31-32)

Occasionally, however, these withdrawal strategies were not enough to cope with the “poisonous environment,” subsequently, other types of coping

mechanisms were employed to help participants escape the hostility. Sandra recalled using alcohol as a way of dealing with the secrecy and anti-lesbian attitudes:

I've thought about it (drinking and socializing) within the realm of lesbians in sport. That was a big concern for me in my university years because it's part of the way I dealt with things, by drinking. I know it's not everybody's situation but it was the situation with my partner and I at the time. That's how we dealt with things, (we said to ourselves) "I'm sure it'll go away if we drink one more!" (laughs) That's always something I wanted to talk to other women about and see if that's been part of their experience and seeing if that's how they handled it? [...]. It was for me. (pp.32-33)

In addition Julie recalled that after particularly violent and homophobic reactions to her lesbian sexuality from her family she physically sought help when she "turned to a therapist" for counselling (p.19).

When the discrimination reached a level which some of the participants would not tolerate they withdrew from their sports altogether or joined new teams in the hope that the atmosphere would be less "poisonous." When I asked Aoife what made her stay in her sport, she stated categorically that she was "*not* going to continue being there," she was going to leave because of the hostile atmosphere. In addition, when I met Tina sometime after our first interview she confirmed that she had left her team because the atmosphere was not a healthy one for her to be in as a lesbian. Kelly also told me, in a second interview, that she had also moved to a new team. The act of physically withdrawing from their sports and pursuing something less discriminatory was certainly an essential coping mechanism for these athletes. Unfortunately, Kelly's new team that was "twice as bad" in terms of being hostile and homophobic than the one we discussed in our first meeting but she opted to play there for other personal reasons.

Generally, the process of withdrawing physically allowed these athletes to deal with whatever was “thrown at them” because they could ‘escape’ attacks. Withdrawing provided them with some personal space away from destructive behaviours and negative attitudes.

Reversing the Tolerance

Reversing the ‘tolerance’ these athletes often experienced in a homophobic sports world was another strategy they used to manage their lesbian identities in sport. Having listened to many messages about how others might not accept them, some of the participants turned this ‘tolerance’ around to reflect their views of what *they*, as lesbians, found acceptable and not acceptable:

It would help if (my coach and teammates) were more tolerating of the way I was but you know, I don’t really care anymore. They are going to have to tolerate me because I am *here*. And, you know, *I’m* putting up with *them*, so *they’ll* have to put up with me. That’s the way I feel! (Aoife, p.42a)

By reversing the tolerance these participants flipped the responsibility for acceptance onto their own shoulders and took control over what *they* were prepared to tolerate in their lives. Meghan explained that her response to others who would not accept her was to say that her sexuality was part of her and “if you don’t accept it, that’s okay, that’s your choice but it has *nothing* to do with me” (p.22). Aoife described how she dealt with the very hurtful reaction of her best friend to her news that she was lesbian and how she coped with playing on the same team that season:

I just ignored her. I just couldn’t have anything to do with her or else it was too much. *She* was too much to deal with. My way of coping with it? Well, I just figured, “well she’s not *worth* it.” And “I have *enough* grief to deal with right now. She can do her own thing!” If *she* needs some help, that’s fine! (p.18a)

Both these women afforded themselves the option of not tolerating those who did not tolerate them rather than acquiescing to accepting condescending tolerance.

Meghan described a situation where she observed lesbians reversing tolerance and was unique to her story. She explained that lesbian athletes on her national team formed the most powerful group of players, and they often displayed a lack of tolerance towards heterosexuals. She commented that being a lesbian was *definitely* a factor in bringing the lesbian group closer together and that the newer players who were not lesbian struggled more in getting in, and feeling accepted on the team:

P: With the exception of one player of the eight (western) players, they're all lesbian. And because they've played so many years together and they spend so much time together outside (the sport), it's really brought them a lot closer. So that makes it a type of clique that's really hard to get into. Less so for me I think because I *am* a lesbian. But when I listen to the younger players, it's a real, you know - they really feel this (pauses) distancing. Like *not* accepting. It's funny too. It's the *lesbians* on the team that are more or less saying, you know, "*we* accept you or *we* don't!"

I: Kind of a role reversal?

P: Yeah. But I mean it's power in numbers and they're a very strong force. (pp.29-30)

Another way participants reversed the 'tolerance' was to confront the heterosexual assumption that lesbians were always "trying to pick them (heterosexuals) up." The stereotype of lesbians being 'sex maniacs' which I described earlier prompted Aoife to retort, "I wish my hetero friends would not flatter themselves" (p.2b). While Tina commented that "none of them (her teammates) had nice bodies" (p.32) so she was not interested in them! Clearly this reverses the myth of lesbians as voyeurs and sets up their heterosexual teammates and their heterosexual bodies as *not* acceptable to lesbian gaze. Aoife's words

summed up her strategy of reversing tolerance. It was apparent that she detected that feelings of ‘disapproval’ often persisted behind the outward displays of ‘tolerance.’ She found this *conditional* tolerance of others condescending:

Like, oh, people just have the most hilarious perceptions. It’s so funny. And they say, “oh, we *accept* you.” And that’s wonderful. But, well, *too* bad, “I *don’t accept* you! (p.46a)

Reversing tolerance was a strategy through which these athletes took control over what *they*, as lesbians were prepared to accept from their heterosexual teammates and coaches. In essence the lesbian athletes began to determine what they would tolerate, reversing the condescending tolerance they often experienced from others. This in itself is an act of resistance.

Risk Taking

At the end of the continuum of ‘lesbian strategies’ is the theme of risk-taking. When coping with the “poisonous environment” these athletes did not *always* utilize strategies which masked their lesbian identities. In contrast *all* the participants had at one time chosen to ignore some of the risks involved in being stereotyped or identified as lesbian, did not always remain silent or secretive about being lesbian and often did not attempt to ‘retreat into sameness;’ the decision to take these risks was often premeditated. Like the other strategies described, there were varying degrees of risk-taking behaviours ranging from challenging discriminatory remarks towards minorities to more explicit “in-your-face” flaunting of their lesbian sexuality. Given the participants perception of their hostile environment, these risk-taking behaviours cannot be underestimated.

Many athletes described that they were not always “into impressing the boys or trying to fit in.” Heidi recalled:

I was at that time more comfortable in jeans and a sweat-shirt. [...]. I didn't really want to wear skirts and dresses as much, yet that's what was worn by a lot of my straight peers who were not into sport, or who were into sport. (p.10)

They were aware that this strategy may have resulted in speculations about them being a lesbian but, as Dara commented, more often than not others were kept guessing:

Like people on the basketball team thought I was punk. [...]. They go "okay (Dara's) punk." [...]. So for some of them - even if they knew - that's how they made up for it in their brains. Like, you know, "that's just (Dara), she's strange anyway?" (pp.35-36a)

Risk-taking involved challenging society's notions of femininity, about how women should dress and act. Meghan commented:

I think that a woman can do everything that a man can do. [...]. People are like "oh, you're a *woman* and you've done *all* this?" And I kind of go "well anybody can do it. It's just the desire or whatever, believing you can do it. Or if you can't do it, you find out how to do it and it's no big deal, you know? (pp.50-51)

In addition to taking risks to challenge feminine stereotypes, other participants challenged discriminatory attitudes towards minority groups. Some explicitly 'checked' others on their sexist, racist or homophobic attitudes while others used their positions as educators to promote a knowledge of diversity. Although there was often an initial hesitation to confront people directly on lesbian issues some participants did take calculated chances to address stereotypical language. Sandra commented that in her work as a teacher she was constantly confronted with others using the word "fag." She chastised her students for using offensive language, however, she recalled that on her team rather than directly challenge her teammates comments as she does now in her career, her strategy was to silently withdraw from the "verbal bashing." As she gained more confidence in

herself she took more risks *not* to “appear like one of the crowd.” Dara recalled how she was viewed as the “language police” on her team.

I was strongly opinionated when it came to things that were sexist, racist or homophobic. And that’s something that, although I wasn’t out, I would *not* put up with. I would *not* listen to someone say the “blond jokes.” If someone said “hey, you, fag!” I would call people on that and even though I wasn’t out, I would call people on language. And I would use the excuse - not the excuse - I’d use the reasoning [...] “why say this, when there are so many other words to describe how you are feeling?” (p.28a)

Other participants also stated that if they recognized discriminatory behaviours among their peers they would “probably call them on it:”

If I heard negative comments now, I’d be a lot more vocal especially if it has something to do with an individual player, and might be perceived as something negative which I don’t necessarily believe, obviously. (Meghan, p.24)

Tina gave lesbian literature to others emphasizing how essential it was to read it in order to dispel stereotypical myths while others tried “to put a word in” to challenge myths and discriminations when they could. Aoife even suggested to her teammates that they should find out more about lesbian sexuality if all they believed was that “one plays the man and one plays the woman.” She recalled how her teammates often “spouted” that lesbians flaunted their sexuality, on one occasion she took the risk to confront them:

I just said, “you know, don’t you think that the straight people flaunt it *too*?” And they were scraping their chins up off the ground (laughs). It was hilarious, so funny! (p.46a)

As I read their stories of risk-taking it was apparent that these risk-taking behaviours could even be placed on a continuum of “riskiness.” The fulcrum of risk-taking appeared to be the act of disclosing their lesbian sexuality. Each time one of the participants disclosed their lesbian sexuality to others constituted a

considerable risk-taking behaviour. Their degrees of ‘outness’ while participating in sport was described in the “Methods” chapter. However, risk-taking to disclose was controlled by two elements, firstly, they only came out to people they “trusted:”

P: The first person I told was my sister. [...]. I guess I felt comfortable enough to share it with (her). I got to (her) place to tell her about this and I broke out crying because of all the stress. I thought I could just unload it. [...]. My sister was saying things like “did you maybe want to go for a walk outside? And I’m “yes.” Boo, hoo, hoo, bawling away. We finally went for a walk and I told her. [...]. It was very positive.

I: Did she encourage you to tell some other people?

P: Ah yeah. I would say, I told lots of - I guess people that I felt close enough to be able to talk to like that. (Meghan, pp.20-21)

Secondly, rather than making it explicitly known to others ‘up front’ that they were lesbian, they often just “ended up” telling others. It was not necessarily the ‘last straw’ but from their descriptions ‘coming out’ seemed to be, at some point in their lives, a necessity, almost forced because of a crisis or a cry out for support:

I came out to a couple of my good friends on the team that I trusted because I was going through a really hard time. (Aoife, p.12a)

Others commented that their ‘coming out’ was prompted by the desire to let others know “what was going on in (their) life.” Tina recalled that she and her partner were often separated by long distances at the beginning of their relationship and she felt lonely because no one knew she was in a lesbian relationship. Her strategy was to take a risk and tell someone her secret. However, she explained she needed some help to prompt her to disclose:

I came home and I was *really* drunk and I crawled into bed with him (a male friend). And I said, “I’ve got something to tell you. You know (my friend) and I? Well, we’re together, you know?” (p.19)

The desire to let others know what was going on in their lives was inexorably tied to the participants confidence in themselves and their attitudes towards their own sexuality:

I came out to one of my literature professors last year [...]. I wrote a paper on lesbianism and the rejection of the patriarchal reality. [...]. I would *never* have done that in my second year, you know, written what I feel is right. I've really strong views that perhaps are a *way* too radical but that's what I believe. (Aoife, p.38a)

It was apparent that risk-taking behaviours precipitated being less guarded about being identified as lesbians:

I'm certainly not out to everybody but I talk about my current partner and she comes out - and a lot of the times we're together. We go to the games and that kind of thing. I sure don't get defensive and cover for things. (Sandra, p.26)

Dara also recalled how she and another lesbian teammate "invited a whole bunch of teammates to come to a (gay) bar" with them after the final day of a tournament and although no one went she enjoyed asking them! Similarly, Meghan commented that on road trips when her team went out socially she chose not to "go to a straight bar" but joined her lesbian teammates social outing. Others commented that they were; "not quite as intensely protective about their (lesbian) identity now" and "didn't want to pretend anymore" to be someone other than who they really were. Meghan suggested that since she took the risk to be "open enough with (herself)" to say that she was "attracted to and has chosen to get involved with women," she expected others to be as open with her and accept her. Similarly, Tina commented that if someone asked her if she was a lesbian she would not hide her sexual identity, she stated categorically:

I'm not going to go around and lead a double life. I'm not going to, you know, say "oh, I'm gay," to some people, and "I'm not gay," to other people, you know? (pp.10-11)

Both Aoife and Dara told me during their interviews that they “didn’t care” what others thought about them being lesbian:

Like what it came down to when I started playing here with my women’s team was I just basically got to a point where I didn’t care what people thought. Like they knew me enough that if they were going to like me, they were going to like me. And if they’re not, they’re not! (Dara, p.38a)

Aoife remembered her reaction to a “contingent of dykes” calling ‘hi’ to her in front of a large group of her teammates:

They were shouting “hi, (Aoife) how’re you doing? And I’m walking across the middle of the (gym) floor and there’s people everywhere. I just wanted the floor to open and swallow me up (laughs). Then I thought, “*no, this is great.*” And I walked over (to them) and said “hi” to everybody and I had a great time. (p.20a)

Both these athletes demonstrated to others through their risk-taking behaviours that they were comfortable with themselves as lesbians:

When I broke up in the summer with my girlfriend, that’s when I *really* came out to everybody. [...]. I haven’t made any qualms about saying like, “I’m seeing somebody else.” You know what I mean? [...]. Like even over the last five, six months, I’m a lot more out and I walk around with my coffee mug that says “homophobia” on it! (Dara, pp.43-44a)

Similarly, Aoife developed a confrontational style and in further correspondence with me, she assured me that she still maintained this ‘boldness.’

I’ve developed an “in-your-face” attitude that I’ve never had before and things don’t affect me the way they used to. I think the most important thing that I’ve learned to develop is my self-assurance and confidence and the knowledge that *I’m* just as good as everybody else. I think that is *so* important. You want to learn that! (Aoife, p.37a)

Finally, risk-taking involved having more contact with lesbian communities and lesbian culture. Participants did not always withdraw from or steer clear of lesbian communities. They all had at some point in their lives, socialized at lesbian

bars or participated in all-lesbian or gay events. With a desire to, as Tina stated, "meet their own kind" many of the participants made contact with or joined teams where the majority of the players were lesbians. At the time of interviewing one athlete had competed at the Gay Games in 1990. Since then, two more women have participated at the Gay Games in New York in June 1994. Although these events do not gain extensive exposure outside the lesbian and gay community it is often difficult for lesbian athletes to conceal what they do because as Dara said, in elite sport "everybody knows every intimate detail of what you're doing and if they're *not* asking, they're *too* afraid to ask" (p.52a). For some of the participants identifying with a lesbian community was and is still an essential part of their coping mechanisms

I've surrounded myself with a lot of gay and lesbian friends. So it's really easy to be out and hang out, and go to all sorts of gay establishments, restaurants and bookstores. Unless you go out into the suburbs, you don't have to worry about it. You can become kind of exclusive in who you hang out with. (Dara, pp.2-3b)

Identifying with a lesbian culture was also manifested in other ways, for instance, Aoife described how she flagrantly flaunted stereotypical lesbian behaviour which contrasted to her usual 'team' behaviour just to elicit a reaction from her teammates:

I think I really shock the (team) players sometimes. Like if I'm wearing my cowboy boots with silver buckles on them and my labrace, they're *not* used to seeing me like *that*. They're used to seeing me in my uniform, in my equipment or else jeans or whatever they all wear. Sometimes I come in looking *pretty* 'dykey!' Oh, I've got quite the swagger and I just love it. I'll just wear whatever I want and *they* can deal with it. I love it, I can't get enough of it! (Aoife, p.36a)

In addition to these more public ways of risk-taking many participants have taken risks in their private lives while developing relationships. Two participants disclosed to me that their first relationship was with a teacher or coach. Both these

women commented that to their knowledge no one knew about their relationships except perhaps their parents might have had "an idea" but "never said anything."

Kelly recalled the risks she took while managing her student-athlete/teacher-coach relationship:

With this teacher friend I was always going to her house or going for movies. I was always there. And they always asked me "why are you *always* going there?" And I'd say "well, she's a really good friend" and "she's given me a lot, she's taught me a lot. We just get along, is that a crime?" (They) understand how much I cared about this person. I don't really know if (they) understand to what *extent* I cared about her. I wasn't ready to make (them) more suspicious. I just said "we're really good friends" which was true! (pp.23-24a)

Tina told me how she would often "sneak" into her partners' bedroom while she was staying in her partners' parents house, she recalled it being very stressful! She was always aware of the risks in being identified as lesbian, however, she described other risks she took with her partner:

When we go grocery shopping, sometimes I am just *so* close to her, you know, I don't care. I don't know, somedays you can't get enough of someone and we'll be pushing the cart and I'll have my hand on her hand, and it doesn't seem to bother us too much. But then sometimes, you know, we'll be in the car and I'll give her a kiss, and I'll say, "opps, we'll get caught!" You know? We kind of laugh about it. (pp.40-41)

The risk-taking behaviours described by the participants were ways they coped with the perceived hostilities towards lesbians in sport. Their personal investment in sport made it very difficult to confront anti-lesbian attitudes, however, some athletes confronted these attitudes by taking risks to address issues of discrimination. Although there was often hesitation to confront others directly on lesbian issues, some athletes became the "language police" on their teams or attempted to address lesbian issues indirectly, speaking out against all stereotypical comments about minority and marginalized peoples. In this way they were able to

educate about diversity, *and* confront comments about lesbians without feeling too vulnerable. In addition many strategized to take more risks to challenge heterosexist myths and disclose their lesbian identity.

In conclusion, the participants have used many strategies to cope with their often hostile and homophobic environment of sport. They remained silent, were secretive and often gave the impression that they were indeed part of the crowd, the heterosexual crowd. Many of the strategies they chose were planned in response to either observing others' reactions to lesbians or to their own perceptions of what they believed would happen to them if their lesbian sexuality was disclosed.

Participants took defensive (reactive) or offensive (proactive) measures to ensure that they would not have to "face the wrath" of individual homophobes and institutionalized heterosexism in sport. In contrast as some of them gained more confidence in their sexual identity, they took more risks, proactively, to disclose their sexuality and demonstrate to others that being a lesbian was not something that they were 'grieving' about. From their stories it was apparent that they were always *acutely* aware of the mixed messages they received in sport. As a consequence of the hostile and homophobic sporting environment in which they participated, they assumed many roles to endure and manage the real, and potential discriminations that they might have confronted in sport.

CHAPTER FIVE

ATHLETE UNDERSTANDINGS AND RESEARCHER INTERPRETATIONS

“Cages. Consider a birdcage. If you look very closely at just one wire in the cage, you cannot see the other wires. If your conception is what is before you is determined by this myopic focus, you could look at that one wire, up and down the length of it, and be unable to see why a bird would not just fly around the wire any time it wanted to go somewhere. Furthermore, even if, one day at a time, you myopically inspected each wire, you still could not see why a bird would have trouble going past the wires to get anywhere. There is no physical property of any one wire, *nothing* that the closest scrutiny could discover, that will reveal how a bird could be inhibited or harmed by it accept in the most accidental way. It is only when you step back, stop looking at the wires one by one, microscopically, and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage, that you see why the bird does not go anywhere; and then you see it in a moment. It will require no great subtlety of mental powers. It is perfectly *obvious* that the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers, no one of which would be the least hindrance to its flight, but which, by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon.” (Marilyn Frye, 1983, pp. 4-5)

An essential part of this research was to explore how these lesbian participants made sense of their experiences in sport and ‘how’ they understand ‘why’ they have the experiences that they do in sport. In this chapter I will describe both the athletes understanding and my interpretations of the sports world and their individual lives. The themes discussed are not their experiences per se but are both the athletes and my reflections of those experiences. Firstly, I will describe how both they understand and I interpret the sports world as an institution which maintains heterosexism and homophobia; secondly, I will describe how they and I make sense of how their lesbian experiences are shaped and constructed within the context of a ‘poisonous environment;’ and thirdly, I will discuss how their

experiences can be interpreted beyond their individual lives to a broader social context.

Part One - Making Sense of the Sports World

Through the participants stories it was clear that the sports world sanctions ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ through the maintenance of norms, the promotion of a fear of difference and internalized homophobias. These perpetuate an unwillingness to understand or accept difference thus causing an avoidance of, or backlash towards lesbian in sport.

Social Expectations and Male Egotism

Although participants said that the mixed messages they received in sport made them uncertain about potential reactions to them as lesbians, they were extremely aware that heterosexuality was sanctioned as the “norm” in society. They perceived that they were required to follow some “socially prescribed way of acting and behaving” in order to be accepted. Sandra commented that she felt she could not come out as a lesbian in sports because:

The way things were at the time *and* the way things are in society, it wasn’t right for me to say anything at the time. (p.17)

Inquires about “getting married” and “having a boyfriend” convey the expectation that, as a woman, the goal in life is to “have a man” and be heterosexual. Julie explained:

It always astounded me the extent to which our sexuality, women’s sexuality, is immediately questioned. The point is you’re supposed to be the little wife that stays at home, thank you very much and become the breeder of many children. That’s a norm. Not of course one that’s been accurate either for working class women. I mean the running joke is you go up into northern Ontario and into some of the mining towns, you walk in, take a look around and you say “okay”

it's a town filled with miners and dykes!" All the moms are wearing their husbands jackets. It plays itself out depending on - you know in a working class town, femininity looks a lot different than within (the city) I was raised in a suburb with a particular form of femininity, and that form was you know, "yes, go off and be a lawyer but have kids too!" (pp.13-14)

These social expectations pressure lesbians to "fit into a norm." All these participants were intensely aware that it is "socially structured that women aren't supposed to love women," that lesbian sexuality "isn't seen by society as all that favourable," and that society has "more or less concluded that lesbian sexuality is not right." Participants felt that the expectations of a "straight world" have shaped attitudes towards women in sport.

Aoife believed that there was a general disregard demonstrated towards women in sport. In her experience this was manifested when her women's team got relatively less funding than some of the men's teams at her university despite her teams' continued success. She felt that women's sport "takes a back seat" because administrators do "nothing to peak the public's interest in it." In addition she interpreted this lack of funding as an indication of peoples' fear of strong women in sport.

I: What do you think administrators view of women in sport is?
They don't want to promote it?

P: They don't want it at all. Don't want to promote this lesbian thing!

I: Do you think that's the underlying message?

P: Oh yeah. People get really embarrassed with strong women. They seem to really shy away from that. Even the female executive is supposed to be beautiful and wonderful, you know?

I: And straight?

P: And straight! She's supposed to go home to her husband who's looking after the children - and a woman in athletics is, you know, physically very strong and capable *and* has a mind of her own. In my (playing position) I'm very aggressive. I don't think a lot of men like to acknowledge that women can be as aggressive and strong as a man. People lose sight of the fact that women are very, very exceptional athletes and are proving better in a lot of things [...]. It's a sad state of affairs but that's the way it is. And it's going to be very slow in changing. (pp.57-58a)

Social expectations demand that women be "beautiful and feminine" which is quite the opposite to how lesbians are stereotyped.

If you take your stereotypical heterosexist view of a dyke, of a lesbian [...] - she looks like a man, walks like a man. She has a haircut like a man, she never wears any make-up. She has a very loud strident voice. She wears her collar up which I'm told is the sure sign of a '70's retro dyke! (Aoife, p.29a)

The message conveyed by this persistent stereotype is that lesbians are not 'real' women and, therefore, they have been constructed as deviant in sports. Any women who are cut and defined are, consequently, under suspicion.

The first thing people do when they see a really muscular woman is say, "she must be a lesbian." Or some women who really enjoys sport especially like a contact sport, a physical sport, is "she must be a lesbian." (Sandra, p.21)

Again, however, mixed messages about muscularity in women's sport persist. In the last decade the proliferation of the fitness industry has sanctioned women's pursuit of fitness and health. Ironically, while pursuing a healthy musculature the emphasis remains on projecting one's heterosexuality, therefore, only particular sports (read more feminine) are sanctioned. Even today all the athletes are aware that, in general, people still tend to question women's sexuality especially if they play a sport that has been defined as "non-traditional" for women:

If you play a sport like hockey they're going to think "there's a good chance that the woman's going to be gay." Like you think of a figure skater, you're not going to see any gay figure skaters but

you're probably going to see a lot of gay hockey players. Depending on the sport you play you're probably going to have that much more of a chance as being recognized as being a gay athlete. (Kelly, pp.33-34a)

Several women indicated that there was a "real strong perception" that their sports were "full of a bunch of lesbians." As all these athletes participated in team sports, therefore, they were already in a 'field' that was stigmatized (Lenskyj, 1986). They perceived that disclosing their lesbian sexuality would confirm the assumptions that people had about women playing particular sports, therefore, perpetuating the myth that lesbian are pervasive in team sports. Julie's father always associated her sport with lesbians:

Around the house (he said), "oh my god, she's gone into (that sport)! She's gonna end up a lesbian!" (p.15)

She recalled when she first came out as a lesbian:

My dad's immediate response was, "I should never have let you play *that* game." (p.15)

As society rarely validates women's physical ability or achievements, in a way that it does with men in sport, without some conditional labeling (Lenskyj, 1986) these athletes are vulnerable to homophobic ridicule.

A lot of men tend to invalidate a women's level of ability if she is playing on a particular team that is renowned as being gay or it's a sports that's not mainstream acceptable, acceptable in the mainstream for women, stereotypically okay! So men may "ooh" and "aah" at a ballerina or at a female tennis player. But they go "aha, *sure*" when they see a very good women baseball, softball or soccer player. (Heidi, pp.18-19)

Heidi's account illustrated another aspect of how some of these athletes made sense of the intense reaction towards lesbians in the sports world. Some athletes perceived that men played a key role in "why" lesbians were discriminated against in sport, and collectively acknowledged male egotism as the cause. Men's

difficulty in accepting lesbians in sport is due to the fact that they have “small egos” and “were insecure” with their masculinity. Heidi recalled that many of her male friends through college were not supportive of lesbians because of this “insecurity.”

Men phys ed teachers, unfortunately, tend to live up to their stereotype which is having real difficulty with their ego’s. And their ego’s are very much dependent on their sense of their own masculinity. (p.30)

Although men’s insecurity with their masculine identities may be part of the intolerance towards lesbians in sport I believe there is more to it than just “egotism.” Sport is a key tool to work the development of masculinity, it celebrates masculine dominance and maintains male power (Lenskyj, 1991; Messner, 1990). Julie stated:

(Sport) is about gender, it’s a set of relations, men and women and men have the power. So when we think about it, if they’ve got the power, sport is the key construct in society that gives them *more* power and teaches men to be men. And what do we do when we’re little lesbians in the midst of it all? (p.30)

The presence of women in sport historically, has challenged masculinity and the co-optation of sport as a male preserve (Birrell & Richter, 1987; Lenskyj, 1986). The ‘double whammy’ is that lesbians both challenge masculinity and the traditional status quo of heterosexuality:

As soon as any woman is in there it challenges *definitely* the notion of what masculinity is about. And then as well, as soon as you’re ‘out’ being a lesbian in sport you’re doing two things, you both challenge the very traditional stereotypes *and* I think you’re immediately naming the homo-erotic aspect of sport, within men’s sport, which is why I think these guys have such an intense reaction because the unconscious label is there. (p.14)

Ultimately Aoife believed that lesbian sexuality was constructed as a deviance in society, and subsequently in sport because “straight society fears that we don’t need men.”

Imagine being a male and realizing that you can be easily replaced by a test-tube at the local sperm bank? Every rancher knows that the best specimen of cow is the result of AI (artificial insemination). There is approximately one bull for every 1000 cows. Hard for any man to take! (p.2b)

Compulsory heterosexual expectations, the threat to male egotism and, more importantly to male power act to oppress lesbian athletes. There is an attempt to force lesbians and heterosexual women in sport into narrowly constructed definitions of femininity. In addition, these structural (heterosexist) expectations at the macro level influence and construct reality for individual interactions at the micro level where everyday interactions with individual homophobes takes place.

Fear of Difference and Internalized Homophobia

The construction of lesbians as deviants, historically, has resulted in the persistent pathologizing of lesbian sexuality. Subsequently, because some heterosexuals perceive lesbians as abnormal and outside the “norm” a fear of “difference” is perpetuated in sport at the micro level:

I think they’re just scared of the situation in general, the fact that you’re gay. Like I don’t think anybody’s scared of me, just the fact that I’m probably gay, they’re scared of that. (Kelly, pp.14-15a)

Some athletes felt that because lesbian sexuality was not something that was always explicit in the everyday lives of their coaches or teammates, when it did surface feelings of discomfort increased.

They’re insecure with, you know, who is and who isn’t. I don’t know if they have a *desire* to know? Perhaps so they can stay away? Choose who they want to play with? Who they want to be friends with? (Kelly, p.11b)

Fear of ‘difference’ extends beyond mere discomfort. Dara remembered that “everybody was so paranoid” about being labeled a lesbian that they often went out

of their way to distance themselves from the label to protect their identities. This paranoia is constructed by a society that informs us to be cautious of difference and to fear change. These fears are institutionally reinforced to maintain homophobia. The incentives to fit into the norm, to assimilate rather than celebrate sexual difference, are far greater than the incentives to not conform. In team sports ‘difference’ can mean a team’s cohesiveness is threatened. Kelly recalled why her team’s motto was “you can skate, if you’re straight.”

They wanted everybody to be straight so everybody can be close, pal around, go out for beers and talk about guys *and* put down the dykes on the team. (p.6b)

Dara also commented on how this fear of ‘difference’ is perpetuated on sports teams and how it can ultimately affect “team dynamics:”

There’s always one or two people that are very set in their homophobic ways and whether somebody else is really comfortable - like who’s straight - and is friends with someone who’s lesbian, they don’t know how to defend that person necessarily. A friend who like would be sitting in conversation with this other person who’s really homophobic and if that person made some kind of “fag” or “gay” or “dyke” comment, I’m sure it would be hard because you have to play and be close to people on that team and if you started sticking up for somebody, like the team dynamics get all screwed up.

You know I think that if you have a team where everybody’s really comfortable - straight or not - with their sexuality and there one person either who’s like a really good player or who has lots of experience or who’s really well respected and they’re totally homophobic - that person will either leave ‘cause they can’t handle everybody being so open or they’ll start affecting other people depending on what kind of personalities they have. People will be trying to protect themselves, ‘I’m not queer! I don’t care if so and so is queer but I don’t want to be seen as queer. I don’t want people to hate me!’ (pp.39-40a)

This fear of ‘difference’ does adversely affect team dynamics not because lesbian athletes do not conform, rather heterosexual players and coaches are so paranoid about the lesbian presence that it is constructed as a problem. This

'difference' is maintained by heterosexual players and coaches to orchestrate the invisibility of lesbians in sport. This pressure to *not* be different encourages lesbians to retreat into sameness if they want to participate in a heterosexual 'team world.'

The myth of lesbians as sex maniacs also precipitates teammate's "sexual paranoia" which in turn fuels what some athletes described as a "tension" and "nervousness" around lesbians especially in the locker rooms. Kelly explained that many of her peers could not grasp the concept of "the sexual side of women together." As the paranoia increases individuals do not want to "take their chances" around lesbians because they are "scared someone will come onto them!"

In addition to a fear of 'difference' the participants also explained that their coaches and teammates defensiveness about their sexuality was a manifestation of their internal discomfort and questioning of their own identities. Several athletes believed that this fear, which I will call 'internalized homophobia,' keeps people "in the closet" and away from lesbian issues. Meghan remarked that fear persists because heterosexual women refused to admit that they might be attracted to women:

I heard one comment about why people are "homophobic." It's because they have their own attractions for people of the same sex which makes them feel uncomfortable because it's coming close to them within themselves. (p.36)

Similarly, Aoife commented:

Straight people cannot handle the fact that lesbian sex is better than straight! Straight people cannot handle the fact that they sometimes want to be intimate with someone of the same sex. I really feel sorry for all the straight people who fear my gay-ness. (p.2b)

This fear parallels Audre Lorde's (1984) definition of homophobia as "the fear of feelings of love for member's of one's own sex and therefore the hatred of those feelings in others" (p.45). This fear may explain why women and male coaches react to lesbians in various ways. Even though lesbians in sport pose a threat to masculine power and control of resources, women coaches and players are acutely aware that the possibility of being labeled lesbian increases when there are lesbian players on their teams:

I find that women coaches, I don't know, some of them are straight - they have a hard time dealing with it, if they have gay athletes. Whereas with guys or the men, you know, they don't care, you know, it's not a big issue to them. But I find that it's, I don't know, I don't know if they're (women) *threatened* or what? Like maybe they're questioning who they are? I don't know what it is. But I find that the women, you know, some of them have a harder time with it (lesbian sexuality). (Tina, p.46)

It was acknowledged that absence of this fear was situationally specific and is dependent on the sport and the coach's experiences:

I've seen coaches who were men, who coach women's teams, freak when they hear their athletes are queer. Or heard male coaches who are extremely homophobic. You can tell when they talk, "don't be pansies," or "you're playing like women." And I've heard of women coaches who freak when they hear that their female athletes are queer or dykes and don't want to coach a women's team full of a bunch of dykes. (Dara, p.9b)

However, the threat of being labelled 'lesbian' for a male coach is nonexistent. In contrast, there seems to be a tacit understanding of the implications of the 'lesbian label' for all women athletes. As Tina remarked "what would everyone think about the (coach) being gay? I could see it could jeopardize her career" (p.45). Due to some unwritten law, 'association' with lesbians increases the potential of women being labelled as lesbian. For example, when Dara moved to a new city and played on a new team, a lesbian on the team became her "big sister." She soon

realized that “people pretty much knew that if I hung out with (her) and did things with (her) that I was (lesbian) too” (p.20a). The power of the stigma and perception of being labelled lesbian through association with lesbian players is a crucial element in maintaining the fear of ‘difference’ and internalized homophobia. Fears persist because “people aren’t comfortable with a continuum of sexuality” (Julie, p.15) and, therefore, sexualities outside the norm are not sanctioned.

Lack of Understanding and Courage

As stated previously, heterosexual expectations and assumptions in our society render lesbian lives invisible and perpetuate stereotypical myths about lesbians. Consequently, these athletes felt their negative experiences were in part due to what some of them described as a complete “lack of understanding” of lesbian sexuality. They felt that heterosexual assumptions perpetuated a “naiveté” around issues of lesbian sexuality:

A lot of the (straight players) are really naive to the situation and don’t understand what it’s all about. (Kelly, 10a)

There was “*definitely* not a level of understanding,” others “had no idea” or were “not very educated on it.” Subsequently, this naiveté prompted “judgments” about lesbians thus perpetuating lesbian stereotypes:

It’s so funny to hear it. They just have it set in their minds that that’s what a lesbian is, that’s what they look like, that’s what they do, that’s what they’re about when they really just have *no* clue! (Kelly, p.12b)

A few athletes commented that because heterosexuals did not understand or have the experience of being a lesbian they could not understand what it was like to ‘come out’ or ‘be outed.’ This explains the thoughtless speculation and purging that occurs with lesbian ‘suspects’ in women’s sport which completely disregards

individual lesbians ‘freedom of expression’ and safety. Subsequently, all the athletes felt that their coaches and teammates would not know *how* to deal with someone ‘coming out’ or “just being a lesbian.”

They don’t understand, they haven’t been through it. And they haven’t had that experience. (Tina, p.49)

People don’t understand it. There’s understanding, being open and understanding it, like really knowing what it’s all about. (They) make comments on hearsay rather than having experienced it or knowing somebody (who is lesbian). (Meghan, pp.36-37)

Reflecting on the continuum of experiences that these athletes described this ‘lack of understanding’ certainly explains the insensitivity displayed towards lesbians, and how vulnerable their lives can be. The failure to acknowledge lesbians can not always be put down to “naiveté” and ‘lack of understanding.’ Dara stated, categorically, “you’re *ignorant* if you *don’t* see things” or recognize “diversity exists.” Coaches and players may claim they do not understand lesbian lives or lesbian issues because they are not exposed to lesbians in their everyday lives. However, I believe that this ‘ignorance’ excuses the continued suppression of lesbian sexuality. This lack of understanding I believe masks an unwillingness to want to understand lesbian sexuality in sport. Feldthusen (1990) described this as the “right not to know.” This right not to know “comes from an inability or unwillingness to perceive the world through the eyes of others” and “it is also a rejection of [...] responsibility to inform themselves about it and then join the debate” (p.74). In general the athletes’ teammates and coaches have done little to confront their fears and encompass diversity into their daily lives.

In addition to what the athletes labelled as a “lack of understanding” about lesbian lives there was also a general feeling among the participants that others

"lacked courage" to challenge the established social norms and support lesbian athletes. This 'lack of courage' identified by the athletes is essential in explaining the claims of not 'understanding' lesbian lives. It is the lack of courage to challenge norms that make individual homophobes unwilling to understand. Most athletes felt that their coaches and teammates were afraid of stepping outside social "norms" because they feared being ostracized for associating with lesbians.

I: Why do you think people have a reaction to people being lesbian?

P: There's just so many reasons! I mean (sighs) I think it comes down to the fear of being a social outcast. (Aoife, p.43a)

There was an acknowledgment that it would take "courage" to step outside social norms because the pressures to conform are so great. Unfortunately, these athletes perceived that often others did not have the tenacity to do so. These perceptions were often realized when coaches or teammates reacted predictably to the topic of lesbian sexuality. When Kelly's friend demonstrated a less than favourable response to lesbians, Kelly remembered that she once reacted in a similar way:

P: I thought back when someone asked me about that (lesbian sexuality) and I basically had said the same thing! I said "no, it's gross. I said it simply because I thought it was *expected* that that's what you say.

I: Do you think then there might be a lot of people who actually don't mind it but because they're expected to say...

P: *Definitely.* I think that it's just that they're a victim of the way society is, it's just the way society is and they have to fit so they're going to do what it takes, they're not going to change. They say what they think they *should* say and that's a big problem. That's why I was confused with my friend that I was really close to in school. I don't know if she was saying what she thinks she should say! I'm still kind of up in the air. A lot of people won't say what they believe simply because they're not (sighs) confident enough. The fact that they're not going to fit in so they're not going to say that. Some people aren't strong enough to say what they feel.(pp.29-30a)

Aoife attributed this lack of courage to others not having the “guts” to accept lesbians:

I mean I’m not talking about the guts to acknowledge that they have feelings for women that go past the bounds of regular friendship. They don’t even have the courage to say “(Aoife) (thumps table) you know, I know you’re a dyke, so and so told me you were a dyke and (your partner) is welcome in our house any time.” And a lot of people don’t have the courage, if you come out to them - like I came out to my best friend - they don’t have the courage to say, “well this is really hard for me, I haven’t had to deal with a friend coming out to me before, you know? I’m a little bit scared of it myself but, you know, I’m really proud of you that you did this.” I think it’s just the courage thing. I think that it’s just the courage to depart from our social conventions. We’re departing so radically in every other way. This is just one more way to do it. (p.43a)

In addition, those athletes who have felt betrayed by other lesbian players felt that those lesbians lacked the courage to both accept and support their fellow lesbians, and identify themselves as lesbians. Although some participants remarked that ‘coming out’ while involved in sports would be a “really hard thing to do some were critical of lesbians who remained in ‘the closet.’

The older ones are very established in their ways and no-one knows about them. It just that not much is said, it’s basic knowledge and everything but not much is said about it. I mean a lot of the lesbians that I know are the strongest players on their team but some of them have been in the closet *so brutally*, you couldn’t pry them out with a shoe horn! And they would be such great role models. (Aoife, pp.49,51a)

The pressure to conform and internalized homophobia’s divide athletes. Again I believe the ‘lack of courage’ described by the athletes identifies why there is little support for each other among some lesbian athletes. However, knowing how hard it has been for the participants to ‘come out’ in sport I think there is an understanding of why other lesbians in their sports are not always supportive, although this does not mask the participant’s frustrations. Participants also felt that heterosexual players should take more responsibility to be courageous, after all they

are 'safe bets!' This is not to say that lesbian athletes are devoid of responsibility to take steps but an atmosphere has to be created that allows lesbians to feel comfortable taking those steps. Presently, lesbian athletes are discouraged from being courageous by the structures of homophobia and heterosexism.

As a consequence of the social norms and heterosexism in society many athletes felt that coaches and teammates were 'afraid' to challenge the status quo. In addition, participants believed that the persistent attempt to keep lesbians and lesbian culture invisible and ghettoized compounds the lack of understanding that others had about lesbian lives.

Avoidance and Backlash

In addition to making sense of 'why' coaches and teammates were homophobic and why heterosexism exists the participants also reflected on the manifestations of those fears. Participants commented that their teammates' fears of lesbian 'sex maniacs' and 'voyeurs' encouraged physical avoidance of the locker rooms and showers because they (heterosexuals) felt vulnerable in the presence of lesbian athletes.

The athletes also reflected on why lesbian issues were avoided. It is widely accepted that athletes, at an elite level, espouse conservative values (Beamish & Borowy, 1988). Among teammates there is often a total unconsciousness around any form of political activity both for lesbian issues and social issues in general. Although the participants did not all comment on their coaches or teammates lack of political activism they did indicate that avoidance of lesbian issues reflected the sports world desire to "not want to deal with lesbians."

I guess (my heterosexual teammates) didn't know what to expect. So they just tried to stay away from it all together. Ignore it so they wouldn't have to deal with it. (Kelly, p.4b)

Dara commented that the people who ignore lesbian issues are the kind of people who do not want to deal with any controversial issues in life:

I think people who ignore queer culture, ignore rebellion or something that's different. They're the people who ignore everything, poverty, queer culture, problems with high school violence. They just don't want to be dealing with any problems in life, they just want to deal with their own life. If people don't *want* to see something they're not going to and that's including queer sexuality. People coming in from the burbs, seeing demonstrations in one of the biggest gay areas in town, they don't care or don't *want* to see it. (p.3b)

When individuals do not "want to see it," it is tantamount to acknowledging their discomfort with lesbian sexuality. This avoidance of issues relieves coaches and players of the responsibility to confront their own heterosexism and homophobia. Aoife described this avoidance as "plain old homophobia, a state of denial" (p.1b). This denial is a key element in what I see as the 'passive heterosexism' which pervades sport. When coaches and teammates avoid lesbian issues and ignore the discriminations lesbians face they maintain the barriers which exclude lesbians from being open about their sexuality in sport by denying that any problem exists. In effect their silence and avoidance can be perceived as complicity with heterosexism which is the norm.

In contrast to avoiding lesbians and denying their existence in sport, there were also 'attacks' on lesbians. Sandra suggested that confirming that there are lesbians in sport often precipitates 'confrontations' in their environments:

Even now I'm thinking that there are more women in sport who are out, you know? Or it can be talked about more openly. With that I think there's a more *negative* view. There's greater exposure to

lesbians in sport, maybe more are coming out of the closet that kind of thing but I think there is a rise in negativity. (p.21)

It is clear that this ‘backlash’ targets lesbians because they challenge social norms posing a threat to institutionalized heterosexuality. Tina felt that “straight people can hold your sexuality against you.” This indicates her acknowledgment of the power that the lesbian label had to alter others’ perception of lesbians or lesbian ‘suspects’ in sport. These ‘backlash’ and ‘confrontational’ behaviours and attitudes were labelled by some as “homophobic.” Certainly from what the athletes described they knew that they lived in a “profoundly homophobic world” and sport was “as homophobic as you’re going to get!” However, attributing the cause of backlash only to individual homophobes negates the action of how the sports institution can control interactions at the micro level. It was clear from their stories that the athletes were also aware about the role of society in maintaining an environment in which backlash works.

Although avoidance and backlash appear antithetical they actually work together to make lesbians more invisible in sport. Both indicate the overwhelming discomfort that others had towards lesbian sexuality and the intense sanctioning of heterosexuality in the sports world.

Conditional Tolerance versus Acceptance

I asked some athletes how they made sense of the ‘tolerance’ and ‘openness’ they sometimes experienced. From their stories it was salient that ‘tolerance’ was conditional on lesbian invisibility:

Two of the girls on the team were going out, they hung around a lot and comments were given and everything. Once (one) left the team it seemed like those things slowed down, it wasn’t as bad because they weren’t seeing it. They weren’t seeing them *together*. It’s like

when they *see it*, when they're *around it* or when they know it's there, then they're more nervous or more tense about it. But if it's not there it seems like, well, it's no big deal. (Kelly, pp.12-13a)

Although tolerance is not an appropriate manifestation of acceptance, as it always implies something has to be tolerated, it was interpreted as less negative than some other experiences these athletes had in sport. Kelly who was not 'out' to her teammates commented:

I'm not sure what they think (about me) but they don't treat me any differently, well not to my face they don't. I don't know what they say behind my back but as far as the locker room goes, I've never had any troubles. (p.8a)

Tina suggested that she was tolerated *only* because she perceived others thinking:

"Okay, maybe she *is* gay but she comes here to play hockey. You don't have to party with her or spend time with her after hockey but she comes and she works with the team and is a team player." (p.13).

Kelly felt that it was only the younger players on her team who had "big problems" with lesbians, while Aoife suggested that tolerance was only demonstrated when lesbians did not "flaunt" their sexuality.

Often the participants remarked that heterosexuals were obsessed with a desire to know "who was and wasn't lesbian." I asked some players 'why' they thought their teammates in particular, who were often repulsed by lesbian sexuality brought the subject up for discussion on so many occasions. Tina presumed that simultaneous with her peers defensiveness about lesbian sexuality she believed they "must have some curiosity about it" (p.36). Perhaps on some level 'tolerance' fuels 'homo-curiosity?' When Aoife told me that it was "quite common" with the younger provincial players in her sport for the "talk to turn around to homosexuality" she suggested:

I think that a lot of them are quite fascinated with it which is speculation (for me) - "when are you going to come out?" There are so many rumors and things that people just start talking about them and people *really* want to know who's what? They really want to know who's together! (Aoife, pp.38, 40a)

Although it seems that the topic of 'homosexuality' was frequently raised, this "homo-curiosity" was rarely followed by affirming comments. Perhaps part of the fascination in wanting to know "who's what" was to be able to identify lesbians for ridicule and discrimination. In addition, Aoife said that tolerance was granted to those who did not fit the lesbian stereotype:

Straight people like lesbian chic (like) Madonna, Cindy Crawford - I don't know why. If you can pass for straight, you are probably going to be better off in the straight world. (p.2b)

Obviously tolerance is also granted when you are able to 'fit in' and assimilate to the heterosexual norm, assuming a cover of sameness.

In contrast to tolerance and the more negative attitudes they experienced some athletes did highlight positive experiences:

I think that people are getting a little bit more accepting because there's people like me running around that they used to like when I was straight and so, you know, they got along with me really well. And now that I'm gay, I think that they are finding out slowly that I'm still, you know, the same person. And it's still possible to have a good time with me and I can still play, it hasn't affected (my game)! (Aoife, p.46a)

Dara felt that the individuals from whom she experienced acceptance, and those who most often demonstrated an acceptance of diversity, were older players. She suggested that "they finally got a life and looked to see what was out there, and realized that there were different people in this world," they "opened their eyes and looked to see *what's* happening in this city" (p.21a). She reflected further on 'why' she thought a more accepting attitude sometimes blossomed:

I think there are people who are very confident in themselves and their sexuality so when a person comes out to them and they're straight, it doesn't matter to them because they know that person is their teammate and nothing has really changed and they're also confident about where they are in life whether they're straight or gay. Like one of the players whose sister was a lesbian, I came out to her and she's like "yeah, cool, no problem." And I guess she had been through the whole questioning thing with her sister. "Does that mean I am?"

And they go through all these sets of questions and work through how they feel about their sister or brother, whatever. They realize it's still their sister and they love them just the same as before they found out this information about who they sleep with or who they spend time with, or who they want to care for. They realize that they're still the same person. They've got that knowledge because they've been through the process. So then when a teammate comes out to them, for instance my teammate was "no problem!" She had worked through those questions, she was fine, she wasn't homophobic. (pp.8-9b)

Participants perceived that those who were "more sensitive" to lesbian sexuality and open to diversity realize that "yes, this lesbian is a *person* too," and as a result have an easier time with athletes who are lesbian. When individuals are secure with their own sexuality then lesbian athletes lives can be validated and affirmed.

To understand "why" they experienced their lives as they did all the athletes endeavoured to make sense of both the insidious and intangible hostilities they confronted or perceived in sport, and the more positive messages of acceptance that they experienced. Despite the mixed messages that they described they were always aware that their lives as lesbians were often marginalized outside the "defined norm" of heterosexuality in sport. Subsequently, the fears, misunderstandings and lack of courage in others contributed to the perpetuation of the hostile and poisonous sporting environment in which they, as athletes, managed their lesbian

identities. Their understanding of the sports world at the micro and macro level impacted on how they explained their individual lives.

Part Two - Making Sense of Individual Lives

In an environment like sport which reproduces the rigid norms of a heterosexist society these athletes perceived they would not always be accepted and this has impacted on their lives as lesbian athletes. In this section I will describe how the athletes understand and I interpret their individual lives in the context of the “poisonous environment” of sport. The elements contained in understanding interpreting their individual lives illustrate *how* the participants felt about their experiences and made sense of their individual lives, as opposed to *what* they *did* to cope with a hostile environment.

Uncertainties

The athletes interpreted their world as being one (because of the mixed messages they described) where they were often uncertain about people’s attitudes. This uncertainty was one of the most insidious aspects of their experiences. All participants were aware of discriminations towards lesbians, however, heterosexism and homophobia are not always ‘tangible.’ Discrimination, therefore, was not always explicit, and often ambiguous, therefore, participants did not always know if attitudes were purposely directed at them.

One never knows whether or not the reaction you got in any situation was because you are gay. That’s what makes it poisonous, you are *always* second guessing the situation. (Aoife, p.2b)

The second guessing and constant checking of their sports environments, and experiencing a range of attitudes from openness to confrontations often caused an

uncertainty about what reactions they should expect next. This uncertainty impacted on their desire to 'come out.'

Because of the associations that I've worked with and not knowing if that would be a good thing - it's that fine line of not *really* knowing and not knowing where I'm going with my life or my career, and not knowing if that's going to affect where I'm going to go. (Dara, p.27a)

Not always knowing how their coaches and teammates would react to them or how well their sexuality would be received often caused confusion.

Some people are comfortable with it (lesbian sexuality) and some people are so scared. I don't know *what* it is, I *wish* I knew. (Kelly, p.15a)

Many were also 'uncertain' about who actually knew they were lesbians.

Often people knew the participants were lesbians before they told them, proving that speculation plays a key role in identifying lesbians in sport.

I just found out that our goalie - her boyfriend has known (I'm lesbian) since Christmas and I had no idea. And he found out from another friend, who found out from another friend. And I was like "how do these people know?" I had no idea, I don't understand! (Kelly, p.9a)

Similarly another woman reflected on the uncertainty of 'knowing who knows:'

She (my teammate) told me that (other provincial players) were talking about me. And I was like, "what? My god!" Like who *knows* how it (news that I was lesbian) got to (that province)? Oh god, it was terrible. I was dumfounded. (Aoife, p.42a)

Rumors sensationalize sexuality and focus attention and ridicule onto specific individuals. The individual's sexuality becomes the focal point of their personality, the reason why they must be ostracized. Uncertainty of knowing 'who knows' this information results in even more careful monitoring of their sports environments.

The homophobes possess the power to name, label, and 'out' lesbians and this causes a dilemma in knowing when it is safe to take a risk. For example, Kelly

reflected on her dilemma of not knowing what to say when her heterosexual teammates slander other lesbian players:

I didn't say anything. I didn't *know what* to say. I didn't know if I should defend them and risk exposing myself or if I should just leave it? It's very hard. (p.8a)

As homophobic attitudes were often implicit rather than explicit some participants said that when confronted with more discernible evidence of homophobia they were "floored" or "dumbfounded." Despite careful monitoring their uncertainty sometimes resulted in them not being "ready" or "prepared" for derogatory comments or slanderous rumors. Athletes were "woken up" and "blown off guard" by these more explicit confrontations.

This state of 'uncertainty' changed as participants became more aware of homophobic attitudes and developed their skills to monitor their environments which, in turn, provided them with the information on how safe it was to be 'out.' This in itself prompted new dilemmas of 'uncertainty.' Many talked about being unsure about "*how to come out.*" Dara reflected on this "*how to*" dilemma, the 'skill' of knowing "*how to come out*" often eluded her:

It's a hard thing to do and I haven't figured out *how to like come out.* It's a hard thing. It's not as if you go, "well team, I'm queer, okay? Now go run a couple of laps around the gym." Do you know what I mean? I don't know *how to incorporate being out*, to make it so it's not a big deal - there has to be some easy way - without making it some big production. When I coach here, I coach with a guy [...] and he just brought his girlfriend to practice or to a game. Like is *that* just the way you do it? I haven't figured out a way of just *doing it.* And it's hard to educate without making it a big production in a way. (pp.49-51a)

Managing the uncertainty of how and when; to be out as lesbians; to support other lesbian players; talk about lesbian issues was indeed a skill that required precise negotiations of their lesbian identities. Being 'uncertain' of others' reactions

to their lesbian sexuality was a key element in *why* they engaged in the strategies they did to protect their lesbian identities. In addition the state of 'uncertainty' caused these athletes to experience an ever-present feeling or perception of risk in their lives as lesbians in sport.

Risk

The perception of risk was a common element in the participant's stories. There is a definite risk involved in 'coming out' in a homophobic sports environment but risk varied in its' significance to each lesbian because some more readily confronted the risk through their own risk-taking behaviours, however, all these athletes perceived there was a risk involved with being 'out.' All the participants had anticipated that they would lose the status they had as players on their teams if their lesbian identity was made public:

I see how they (heterosexual players) dig at the other (gay) players and how they're kind of excluded from a lot of things. I've always been part of the crowd, the main crowd and I didn't know if I'd get thrown into that other group 'cause I still wanted to be part of everything that went on. (Kelly, p.9a)

The status which they held on their teams was not necessarily one in which they had much power, instead it was the status of being respected by others. The greatest feeling of risk was the perception of losing this respect:

I: You said quite a lot in the first interview that you didn't want to risk exposing yourself in sport? What do you perceive the risks would be for you?

P: Well, if I expose myself I will lose, I guess, social acceptance and when you lose that I think that's a big part of being on a team. You don't want to lose that, you want to be close to the team. [...]. That's why I guess I didn't want to expose myself, losing social acceptance and then losing, I guess, my spot on the team. (Kelly, p.6b)

Because there is an expectation of sameness, heterosexual sameness, on sports teams many athletes felt that if they were viewed as 'different,' social interactions with their teammates might have been lost. Many were not prepared to "ruin" their sports careers in this way.

I felt that if I did come out in sport I would lose such a big part of my life, and I didn't want to lose that. (Dara, p.4b)

Some athletes had heard about the speculations surrounding Betty Baxter being sacked as coach of the Canadian national volleyball team because she was lesbian, therefore, they knew that "being out" had its' risks in sports. Although many stated that they were "very open" in their personal relationships there were times when the risk of losing status and respect in their sports encouraged them to 'retreat into sameness.'

I think when I was living in (my home city) and playing (my sport) and being involved in sports, when you're an athlete it just seemed that you get put into a position where sports become so much of your life, especially if you are an elite athlete. You usually have started sport early in your life and sport *is* your life. Friends are in your sports and school is tied into that. And I guess for me I felt that if you tell someone that you're a dyke [...] part of what you've grown up knowing, which is sport, the competition and everything, you just feel because it is so homophobic, you feel that whole part of your life can be taken away from you and if you're not careful, you can just be harassed out of the sport and some of the sports are like that. And in (my sport), especially the elite sport is like that. The national coach is homophobic. And friends that I know are so worried who knows that they're lesbian because they're afraid that after being on the national team for 10-12 years, they're afraid that they will lose their spot because the coach knows that they're lesbian. And then you lose your life, something that is so important to you, something that you've worked so hard for. (Dara, p.4b)

One athlete also remarked that there was a risk of losing potential sponsorship for sport. She said that corporations reject lesbian athletes because they do not "want a gay women doing (their) commercials or wearing (their) products" (p.42). This is

certainly true at the elite level and is reflected in the numerous lost endorsements that Martina Navratilova has experienced. The risk of losing this recognition was not worth it for Tina:

If it came down to it, I'd probably be, you know, very guarded. Something I love so much, my sport, I don't want it to be taken away - I'm all for this gay lib thing but some people don't understand or aren't accepting in that particular sport - so I don't want to jeopardize that. (p.43)

Several participants mentioned that personal safety was a concern for them in their sports environments. Many remembered not wanting to admit they were lesbian because they "did not feel safe to be out." Although threats to their 'physical' safety were not a concern for them, they were aware of the realities of "gay-bashing" (physical, verbal or psychological). Julie recalled that she often thought she was "going to get the shit beat out of (her)" by her family (p.6). Risk for her was shaped within the context of a homophobic family, for her 'coming out' prompted "four years of hell!" For Julie the consequences of being 'out' were "pretty high," "not a hell of a lot of fun and "probably the worst nightmare that I think I ever imagined" (pp.12,17).

The risk of compromising personal safety magnified when trying to identify other lesbian athletes. Participants said they confronted risk when approaching someone on another team who they thought might be lesbian. Dara stated that this was a situation where "you don't want to be wrong!" Knowing how much it took to "put (herself) out" she knew that contact could jeopardize someone else's sports career:

If someone who's straight or lesbian goes up to someone who's straight and says "are you gay, are you a lesbian?" The person might assume they're asking because *they* might be. So they're putting themselves at risk because they could get bopped out or who knows

what might happen? And then the rumors would spread, especially in sport, and someone's career could be ruined. (p.5b)

Risk creates feelings of "paranoia" and "hyper-sensitivity" because the consequence of being identified outside the "defined norm" of heterosexuality are great. As a result many lesbians in sports develop 'subterranean' networks with other lesbians athletes, secretly keeping in touch or socializing with at lesbian events.

The anticipated risk of losing respect and status was undoubtedly the main concern for all the participants. For some the feelings of risk did not really go away until they quit their teams, felt a little more independent and stronger in their identities. When they developed their own personal secure foundation separate from homophobic sport, the athletes were less threatened by the uncertainty and risk generated in the heterosexual sports world. Not all the participant's have reached this 'stage' yet. Given the risks these athletes anticipated it was not surprising that many described "being paranoid," nervous" and "scared" about the "wrath" of their coaches and teammates, and justifiably were apprehensive about "coming out."

External Restrictions

The feelings of risk and uncertainty which permeated their lives impacted on how these athletes strategized about their lesbian identities in sport. The athletes made sense of their strategies from 'fitting in' to 'flaunting' as necessary because of the restrictions they perceived that were imposed upon them from an intolerant sports world.

I think that when you are discriminated against or when you get called names, even if it happens to you only once, it affects how you act in life and how you look at things. (Dara, p.3b)

Some athletes explained these "limitations" using language that vividly portrayed their perceptions of feeling psychologically, verbally and physically limited within their environments.

Psychological restrictions were manifested in feeling "pressurized" to conform to heterosexuality. When Kelly told me that her team motto was "you can skate if you're straight," I asked her was there a flip side to that, "if you're gay, stay away?" She replied "not really but you just *felt* it (p.5b). Many participants described feeling "anxious," "nervous," "very uneasy" and "uncomfortable every second" when they were in situations where their sexuality might be questioned.

I didn't feel like I could be out comfortably. Like to feel *really* comfortable being out and walking down a street, meeting somebody who I worked with, kids that I coached. It was just something I wasn't really comfortable with. (Dara, pp.18-19a)

Psychological restrictions also manifested themselves in feelings of accountability for others comfort with lesbians. The social expectations sanctioned in their predominantly heterosexual sports world made some feel responsible to hide their lesbian identities in order to alleviate the discomfort that their heterosexual peers might feel:

I was really afraid - like I was really good friends with some of the younger players and joked around with them so I was afraid that I'd have to travel with them to junior nationals, stay in a room with three women who could be the ages of 16, 17 and 18. And I was afraid that *they* would feel uncomfortable being with me - not that I had any problem with it - but just that they would feel uncomfortable not wanting to be in the room with me. (Dara, p.16a)

When Aoife was rejected by a teammate after having disclosed her lesbian identity she remembered how *she* felt responsible for her friend's reaction, "*I* felt terrible that *she* felt so terrible (p.15a). She also felt responsible for her team's comfort and "wanted to save them the trouble of worrying about it (her being lesbian)." Kelly

indicated that she felt *so* responsible for others' comfort to the extent that she would respect their decision to "pull back a little" from her if they found out she was a lesbian:

I don't blame my friends - like if I told them - if they would avoid me a little more or if they wouldn't associate themselves with me any more. 'Cause I feel that they don't understand it and it will probably take, you know, a lot for them to understand it. It's something that, you know, it's something that they have a *right* to be scared of almost. (p.20a)

Because lesbian issues were avoided in sport many participants also felt restrictions placed on what they could say and this was reflected in their 'silence' and 'secrecy' strategies. Verbal restrictions affected what athletes could talk about or tell others about themselves. Although many were "comfortable with (their) lifestyles" and felt uncomfortable about "lying to people," they were "just *too* scared to tell the truth because of the anticipated reaction. They could never quite tell the "whole truth," indeed they felt there were "certain things we can't say."

Verbal restrictions were not limited to their interactions with heterosexuals, they often occurred in their interactions with other lesbians. Secrecy and silence persists among lesbians in sport because in a homophobic environment other lesbians are afraid of being ostracized by the 'main crowd.'

I'm kind of in a difficult position right now because the girlfriend I've been with for about a year and a half now, she's *very* uncomfortable with people. She's very in the closet, doesn't want anyone to know. If I'm going to be talking about my sexuality, it's about *myself*. I can say I have a girlfriend but she's really not pleased if I would mention her name. She's not pleased about people who might have an idea or are suspecting. It kind of bothers me. I want to let people know, but it's difficult. So if I talk about it it's in the context of *myself*. (Kelly, p.9b)

Due to, as one athlete remarked, the "tremendous stigma" that is attached to lesbian sexuality by a heterosexist society all these athletes felt some restrictions in their

interactions with their teammates, their peers would “never know the real me.”

Verbal restrictions prevented many from expressing themselves openly or sharing stories about their lives.

The negative side and the limiting side was the oppressiveness that I felt that other people put upon me. I couldn't be open with them and have them validate such an important component of my life and yet *they* could tell me endless numbers of stories about their boyfriends, gain all sorts of support during emotionally troubled times, during euphoric times. It was just really, really tough. (Heidi, pp.12-13)

Many athletes also perceived themselves to be physically limited by the “poisonous environment.” These physical limitations reflected feelings of being trapped:

I felt I was kind of in a room with four walls and no door. I felt I had nowhere to go. (Kelly, p.2b)

Feeling physically restricted meant feeling “scrutinized” by others. Sandra described feeling “like you’re in a bit of a fish bowl” (p.8) while Meghan constantly felt she was “in the public eye” and restricted by “judgmental gazes.” This feeling of always being watched caused these athletes to develop acute monitoring and negotiating skills.

Several athletes used language which conveyed this ‘physical’ negotiation of their lesbian identities. They talked about how they have “struggled” and “battled” with both the stigma of being identified as a lesbian in sport and their need to disclose their lesbian sexuality. Tina felt she had to “defend” herself from rumors being circulated about her, while Kelly labeled her struggle as an “uphill battle.”

Dara commented that the struggle was on-going:

In certain settings I've been with kids and teens and I'm their leader, they're learning from me and it's really hard to - I *know* it's important - but I'm *still* battling with that, you know, whether to be out or not. (p.27a)

Dara's on-going struggle was reflected in an experience she had when some junior players she was coaching were "bad-mouthing" a suspected lesbian teacher. Dara did not know whether to "stick up for the teacher and explicitly 'out' her" and (out) herself in the process and remembered feeling that her "hands were basically tied" (p.26a). Meghan also described the perception she had of feeling physically restricted because she felt she could not disclose her lesbian identity. She recalled that the "secret" of being a lesbian was a "burden" and "a big, *heavy weight* that weighed (her) down in some ways" (p.33).

In some circumstances athletes felt more physically restricted than others. Many athletes recalled that social events with their teams usually took place in "heterosexual" environments, "great, straight bars" where sexual diversity was rarely celebrated. At these events the expectations of heterosexual sameness and attraction are often exaggerated as male and female athletes are encouraged to 'flaunt' their heterosexuality. Aoife explained that this "straight" atmosphere on her team was not always one in which she or her partner could feel physically comfortable:

I think my partner (sighs) resents the fact that she can't be comfortable with that team and I also resent it. If there was a team thing my partner wouldn't want to come. I think it's great for partners to do different things in their lives but it's important that the other partner can participate to some degree in encouraging them, knowing that they are encouraging a good thing. Sometimes I come home in tears and in a brutal rage and it's very disturbing for her. There's no support either side! (My partner) understands my competitiveness, that I want to win, that I want to be the best player (but she wants me to be in) something that she can support me in with a happy mind and that I can be healthy in. (pp.32-33a)

All these athletes have felt external pressures and restrictions to cover up their lesbian identity because of the oppression to conform to a "defined norm."

They did not always feel safe enough to be out as lesbians in sport, consequently, the restrictions they perceived that were imposed upon them by a hostile and non-accepting society, at times, meant their lives, loves, friends and politics were rarely validated.

Internal Restrictions

Through these athletes stories it was also evident that they placed restrictions on themselves in response to the restrictions placed upon them by a heterosexist and homophobic sports world. They did not always explicitly explain these self-imposed restrictions, however, it was reflected in how they talked about themselves and their lives in sport. In the “strategies” section I described what they did to ‘externally’ negotiate their lesbians identities in sport, however, in reading their accounts I became aware of the fact that they also placed restrictions on themselves while managing their lesbian identities in sport. These negotiations were not described in the strategies section because the athletes did not describe them as such but I interpreted them as ways in which they made sense of their lesbian lives in a predominantly heterosexual world. In addition, I interpreted some of these self-imposed restrictions as reflective of some of their internal struggles and discomfort with their own lesbian identity and the centrality that their lesbian identity was allowed to play in their lives. I interpreted these restrictions as manifestations of internalizing the heterosexism and homophobia they had experienced, some of which was acknowledged by the athletes. These internalized restrictions were manifested through their desire to lead a “normal existence.”

To be a lesbian in a society where lesbians sexuality is viewed as deviant and abnormal can impact on lesbian lives. It has been well documented that these

messages of deviance are often internalized (Kitzinger, 1987; Pharr, 1988).

Consequently, I believe that some of these athletes feelings about their lesbian identities was a reflection of this internalized homophobia. Many athletes talked about their sexuality as a "normal existence;" and equated their lesbian sexuality with heterosexuality; and talked about making their lesbian sexuality a "non-issue" in their lives. This constitutes what Kitzinger (1987) described as "de-politicizing" one's lesbian identity.

This process which I have labelled "normalizing lesbian identities" was illustrated firstly in the language participants used to self-define themselves. Some women named themselves as "lesbian" but preferred to use the label "gay" because of the "negative" impression of lesbians, sometimes it seemed "a little bit too strong." One woman recalled:

When did I start thinking about myself *that* way? I was involved in a relationship with another woman for about a year or two before I think I started - and even then I don't think I liked the label, and anything I figured was attached to it. It took a lot of other things but I don't think I saw myself as a lesbian until a good way into that relationship. (Sandra, p.7)

Similarly Heidi recalled:

Unfortunately the attention that has been brought to gays in sport in the past has been negative. Thus the term lesbian has a negative connotation to it for many people which is why probably I am one of those that's more comfortable with the term "gay." It's just the one I use far more often. I comfortable with lesbian as well but I don't use that quite as much. (p.38)

In addition to the language they used to self-define, I observed that some athletes often described "lesbian sexuality" or "being lesbian" as "it," "that way," or "that situation." Although I never asked them why they used these substitute words, I concluded after listening to their stories that perhaps even in the interviews where

they could be open about their lives and experiences, sometimes the “L-word” was too strong. The message these athletes constantly receive is that lesbian sexuality is vilified and that in sport lesbians are ‘baited’ and ‘ostracized.’ Constantly using the label “lesbian” to define themselves, therefore, may have seemed uncomfortable for some of the participants. Frye (1983) identified how the dominant heterosexual culture, generally, controls naming and defining: the label given to things can determine how we think or feel about it, or call it. As ‘lesbian’ has, historically, been pathologized and constructed as a deviance using this label to self-identify may bring to mind these constructed images of sickness and immorality.

“Normalizing” their lesbian sexuality was also reflected in their desire to “make it (being lesbian) seem like it’s no big deal” (Dara, p.23a). Many talked about having qualities which they believed were *as much an integral part of* themselves as their sexuality. They did not want to be labeled or judged solely because of their sexuality which one athlete described as being such a “minute” part of herself. *Not* making sexuality a “big deal” was also illustrated in the desire to maintain the privacy of their lesbian experiences. As a consequence of this discomfort some athletes imposed restrictions on who could know “their secret.”

I don’t need to have a whole group of people accept it. I don’t *need* everybody to know. I don’t *need* my team to know and I don’t *need* my classes to know! (Kelly, p.20-21a)

Tina believed that “whatever you do with your partner should be done in the privacy of your own home” (p.40). While Kelly commented:

You shouldn’t be treated differently just because of what you do in your bedroom. Like that’s your own business, that’s no-one else’s. (p.37a)

I believe that normalizing their lesbian identities through viewing their sexuality as a “non-issue” created the perception for these athletes that this would lead to greater acceptance. This acceptance, however, is conditional on the invisibility of lesbians (Durocher, 1991; Kitzinger, 1987). Overwhelmingly, these athletes desired to “be treated like any other normal person” and “just like any other athlete.”

I think the biggest thing would be for all of the athletes to treat you, *first* as an athlete *not* as a lesbian, you know? Treat you as any other normal player. That's right, you're there to play sport, you're not there to shower with the girls after. You're there to go out and play. (Kelly, p.37a)

Although none of these athletes talked about their lesbian sexuality as a sickness it is salient through these statements that some of them did internalize the pathologizing of lesbian sexuality as abnormal.

Making their existence more “normal” prompted one participant to emphasize that she wanted to show others that *even* as a lesbian she could get “dressed up” and look attractive. She was aware of the lesbian stereotype and her strategies illustrated the internal restrictions she placed on herself to distance herself for the lesbian image.

I think a lot of the girls are seeing , you know, “heh, (Tina) can dress up and look really pretty,” you know? And then they get a different - you know, “maybe she really *is* in love?” And it's not *so* bad - you know as when they think of two girls with their heads shaved or something like that, you know? (p.14)

In Tina’s story “normalizing” her lesbian identity allowed her to establish a feeling that she could be very feminine *and* be in a relationship with a woman.

Everyone’s impression from my point of view is that all lesbians have short hair. You know that stereotype? Where I, you know, when I get dressed up I look very feminine. I feel - and the same with my girlfriend - I can go and play a so-called male dominated sport and still have another side of me that’s feminine. Speaking of that, it’s really weird, I always wanted to play sports, [...] have a

shower and then be that woman. So I always wanted to make that distinction. I can play sports well just like any guy but I'm also a woman. (5:13-14)

Distinguishing between themselves and other lesbians was also a part of distancing themselves from the lesbian image and further characterized internal restrictions. Kelly commented that when she met other gay women she looked for qualities about them besides their sexuality to determine whether they have any common bonds. She explained that it was "not important to her who anybody sleeps with." Heidi also stated:

I never aligned myself in particular with a few of the other gay people on the team because they were different as well. They were people who I wouldn't consider to be close friends of mine. I think there's this expectation that just because you're gay you will immediately hone in with other people, and that you're all just of the same mind and heart? Well it's just not true. It becomes a non-issue. Therefore, who are you're friends? And really what does make a friend? What are the qualities you look for? Well their sexuality to a point, hopefully is *not* one of those qualities that becomes an issue. Hopefully it's very much a non-issue when you're looking for other things, their intelligence, their fun-loving nature, whatever it might be! (pp.28-29)

I think that these statements illustrate that it was important for some of these athletes *not* to be identified with some elements and stereotypes of lesbian culture which they were internally uncomfortable with. This distancing helped them 'normalize' their own lesbian lives

The final part of normalizing I observed was how some participants equated being lesbian with being heterosexual. One participant commented that if her partner was a man then that would be fine because she loved her "*not* for the fact that she's a man or a woman." When asked by a friend if her relationship was the same as "girlfriend/boyfriend" this participant stated "yes!" This allowed her to help others

make sense of a situation of which she perceived they had little understanding, and provided her with a frame of reference for her own relationship. She commented:

I mean we do everything just like heterosexual couples. (Tina, p.14)

Later she added:

It's just two people - my partner is the only one who makes me feel special and safe but if it was a guy, then so be it - two people - who cares about the same sex - who can love each other. (Tina, pp.34-35)

Likewise some other participants did not see their "lifestyles" as being "all that different from a heterosexual relationship" while others felt that they were "the same (as heterosexuals) but different." Kelly often debated with herself about whether being gay *or* being straight was normal or abnormal and she concluded that she did "not think that they were *any* different!" Normalizing their lesbian identities made some athletes feel "like it's (being lesbian) not so bad," "less isolated" and "more comfortable" about their sexuality.

In addition, Kelly attributed blame to others as a strategy for normalizing her identity and dealing with her own internalized homophobia of her developing lesbian sexuality. Her first lesbian relationship was with a teacher in high school. The relationship was further complicated by the fact that the teacher was already in a relationship. Kelly felt that her teacher "had a piece of (her), wanting to sleep with (her) *and* this other person at the same time." Although Kelly was not "ready to throw everything away" that (she) had with her teacher, the relationship ended.

Subsequently, Kelly became "very sarcastic" in her teachers class which proved a big strain on their friendship and dropped out of her favourite sport. She "was almost sick of it" because she associated (the sport) with her teacher.

Concurrent with these responses she blamed her teacher for “using sport to get at (her) in other ways,” for making her a lesbian:

I used to blame her. “*You* made me this way!” I realize now that even if nothing happened with her, I would still be this way. (p.27a)

Kelly acknowledged that this ‘blaming’ strategy helped her cope with the realization that “this is *what I am!*”

I used to say, “this is not my fault. This *can’t* be me. Like when I first came out to ah, a couple of my friends, my good friends, I said “this is *just* a phase. This *can’t* last.” I said “this is *not* me. This *can’t* be right. And I felt that ah - well I kept on using the excuse - “oh, I was seduced”. And “I was pushed into this.” And “this isn’t what I *am!*” (p.40a)

For Kelly blaming others was how she coped with both the external and internal homophobias. This blaming strategy was not apparent in other stories but it clearly assisted Kelly in normalizing her experiences while dealing with being a lesbian and was a piece of internalized homophobia that was unique to her account.

From their stories it was apparent that the athletes perceived a degree of acceptance and tolerance would be granted if privacy and invisibility of lesbian sexuality was maintained. In addition to making their lesbian identities a “non-issue,” several participants strategized to align themselves with the “defined norm” of heterosexuality. This was often determined by the ‘poisonous environment’ or their own internalized homophobias. Presently, however, given the risks that remain in being “out” in their sports, many of these athletes had little choice but to normalize their sexuality, to view it only as a small part of their identities and to make it a non-issue in their daily lives.

These restrictions often caused them to miss out on privileges that heterosexual players and coaches had access to; kept them disconnected and isolated

from communities where their lesbian identities might have been affirmed and celebrated; de-energized them; and cause them to be frustrated and angry towards themselves and those who maintained the “poisonous environment.”

Personal Losses

Many participants, inevitably, missed out on expressing their lesbian identities. Julie believed that her “entire sport career was the biggest (coming out) delaying process around” and she concluded that she needed to “get rid of sport before (she) could come out (p.25). Julie recalled that:

It was a real sense of *loss*, a *lot* of lost years, a lot of fun that could have happened. I missed out on *years* of fun. (p.16)

Those who struggled to hide their lesbian identities reflected that trying to ‘fit in’ caused them to miss out on more than just fun:

Pretty soon you may find yourself acting straight to avoid the reaction. You loose your *identity*. (Aoife, p.2b)

Constantly having to deal with messages that lesbian sexuality was “sick” or “abnormal” impacted on their identities

You see I wasn’t out playing (my sport) and in fact if you could put a label on my forehead, I would have been identified as probably one of the most homophobic people around so I’d be off in the other category. I’m serious! And I think that’s something that - my most intense friendships were with women, a couple were sexual but I pretty much denied that. (Julie, p.4)

In order to overcome this some participants completely separated out their sexuality from their sports experiences.’ When Julie finally did ‘come out,’ although she was still active in sport, she had retired from playing national sport. She reflected that “homophobic voices” which “flared pretty loud and clear through (her) head” increased the pressure to conform to heterosexuality.

Socially the hyper-feminine / homophobic response (was) really denying who I was. (Julie, p.15)

Denying their lesbian sexuality allowed these athletes to remain invisible as lesbians in the hope of leading a more “normal existence” within the sports institution.

Denial, however, meant they were forced to lead “dual lives.”

You start to lead that dual life, you know? You have your sporting life and your private life. Your private life becomes even *more* private and you become very, I don’t know, elusive? (Dara, p.4b)

The pressure to be heterosexual caused many to “put on an act” while interacting with others. Leading a “double life” for Sandra consisted of not only managing her developing lesbian identity, in addition, she had the added stress of dealing with her partner’s homophobic boyfriend. Although “it made things *really* interesting,” her life was “quite the dancing routine!” Leading a “dual life” caused feelings of detachment, and made some uncertain “what myself is.”

I almost feel right now that I’m almost *two* different people. Like I have a night life and I have a day life. I go to school, I’m this person when I come home I’m *different* and I can say the things that I might wanted to say during the day so in that way I feel like I’m two different people. (Kelly, p.40a)

For lesbians the personal costs of denying their lesbian identities while participating in sport are high. The pressure to conform to heterosexuality is ever-present and impacted on their sense of self. The struggle to overcome an often depleted sense of self did not always make them feel positive about themselves:

It wasn’t healthy. It was really damaging. Really like a self-defeating kind of thing. It’s crazy, “why am I doing this, it’s not productive.” It didn’t do anything for my self-esteem. (Sandra, p.16)

Some athletes missed other opportunities. Aoife missed competing in the Gay Games in her home city because she had not ‘come out.’ She was “really mad”

that this opportunity had eluded her while Meghan missed an opportunity to develop a relationship with a teammate:

She was the only one in my life at that time and I would have done anything for her but we didn't really talk much about it. I actually don't know to this day what her feelings were for me. (pp.12-14)

In a second interview Kelly explained that she came to the realization that opportunities to feel connected were passing her by:

I was missing a lot. Like missing out on a lot of things that could have helped me as a gay athlete, I guess. (p.21b)

Athletes not only "missed out" on making connections with an affirming community but sometimes lost a connection with coaches and teammates who did not know the participants' secret. For heterosexual players on teams there is always an opportunity to relate stories and experiences to the team about their lives and loves. Subsequently, the team group knows about those players' personal and social lives, their lives can be validated and supported. The team, collectively, can be more intimate on personal and social levels with those players whereas the lesbian players often miss out on sharing their personal stories with others, their lives remain invisible.

The consequences of feeling excluded from a team cannot be underestimated. The opportunities for sharing and support available to heterosexual players allows them to become more integrated members of the team group. However, lesbian players hesitate to share their lives with those who are central to their sports environment. As a result lesbians may feel less integral to the group. In a team sport where an expectation of cohesiveness exists these feelings of missing out on sharing can magnify lesbian isolation. Despite the importance of feeling part of the team, these athletes did not want to push themselves or their lesbian sexuality

on their teammates for fear of generating paranoia. Consequently, lesbian athletes on teams may often miss out on group cohesiveness because others do not know about their lesbian lives. Kelly explained the impact this had on her experiences:

It makes me feel like they don't know the real me. They *think* they know things about me but in actual truth they don't know half of me. That's the *one* thing that bothers me the most, that people *think* they know what I'm like and what I'm like to be around. In actual truth they don't know me at *all*. (p.17a)

The combination of risk and uncertainty, feeling responsible and restricted by social expectations affected lesbians' opportunities to always be themselves. Subsequently, perceiving that they missed out on many opportunities left many feeling isolated, powerless and de-energized from, and angry towards dealing with the homophobia in their everyday lives.

Isolation

The pressure of sanctioned 'sameness' and their strategies to fit in often caused many of these athletes to feel disconnected from an affirming community and their teams. Segregation from lesbian identified places and people was often self-imposed as the athletes strategized to 'retreat into sameness,' and remain 'silent' and 'secretive.' However, as stated previously many athletes were unaware when they were first 'coming out' that other lesbians existed. It was apparent that lesbian invisibility was encouraged in their sports environments and this gave them the impression that they were isolated and alone.

I was in high school, in a small town and it's like "there's the town lesbians, you know? There's like maybe one or two and everybody knows who they are but there could've been more. But at that time I had no clue. (Kelly, p.13b)

Similarly Julie remembered:

I had no idea it (lesbian sexuality) even existed. Absolutely none!
(p.15)

Although Tina was now sure that she could identify her “own kind,” she recalled when she first came out she could not recognize other lesbians. Similarly Aoife remembered when she was first introduced to her sport:

It was the first time I’d ever come into contact with real *live* lesbians. I’d never seen any. I didn’t know *what* they looked like. You know? I had *no* idea! (p.10a)

The perception of feeling alone was most intense when the athletes were “discovering” or “coming to terms” with their lesbian sexuality:

I was kind of left having had this major awakening and there was no place to go. I didn’t know who to turn to and I didn’t know anybody in the community. I didn’t know *where* to go. I didn’t have *any* resources. I didn’t have anyone. It was hard. (Aoife, pp.13,17a)

Isolation occurred for many of the participants at the very point when they needed support and were looking for a safe place, a “home” where they might have been themselves or where they might have felt comfortable talking about their sexuality. Participants commented that they “didn’t feel like (they) had the support system,” had “no-one to talk to” or “really get advice from” and “didn’t know *who* to talk to” or “where to go for support.” Tina recalled having “all these feelings (for women) and didn’t know what to do!” (p.46). Having no-one to talk to increased their internal struggles for self-acceptance magnifying isolation.

I just felt *very* much on my own and probably I guess now - you know it’s hard to imagine what frame of mind I was in then and sort of how my thoughts were running around. But looking back on it I probably, I don’t know, I never thought about, you know, doing anything to harm myself but definitely it was one of the lower periods in my life just trying to deal with this on my own without other people. (Sandra, p.10)

Feelings of isolation were also intense when athletes were not in an intimate relationship with another woman and were further accentuated when relationships ended especially if the relationship was their first lesbian relationship and they were still 'closeted':

I felt really isolated. I was, physically as well as mentally because I moved up to my parents farm outside (the city). I couldn't bear to be in the same city as the person (pauses) that I just broke up with. And I didn't really have anybody to talk to. My parents were just not there for me [...] so I felt really isolated. (Aoife, p.16a).

However, having a partner, although fulfilling many needs, did not always diminish feelings of isolation.

(My partner) was in Europe training, I really missed her a lot. I was hurting *so* bad 'cause I hadn't met any (lesbians) until I played (another sport) last year. That's when I met a whole bunch of people and I'm like, "thank god!" I'd felt like I was the only one. (p.19)

Despite "finally feeling free within a love relationship" Heidi recollects that she and her partner stayed "in our own little world" because they were uncertain of any support systems.

The problem was we felt we *had* to stay within our own environment because we didn't know what support was out there in the world beyond our private space. I didn't know *who* was out there. (p.11)

Heidi remembered thinking that "there *might* be other lesbians out there" but she knew nobody else. Several participants stories also echoed this uncertainty, an initial lack of knowledge of a community of lesbians where they might feel safe. This uncertainty caused many to 'retreat into sameness' and hide their lesbian identities.

When some of these athletes had relationships with teammates, the benefits of having frequent contact at team practices were, for the most part, outweighed by

the fact that no one else on their teams knew about their relationship. Therefore, their personal experiences were kept a secret from their team group. This separation probably isolated other 'secret' lesbians from connecting with each other.

You don't find anybody around you who's, you know, involved in the same kind of things you are, who you can identify with, so your isolated very much. (Sandra, p.16)

When they knew no other lesbians on their teams or in their sport this increased feelings of disconnection. As all of these athletes were participating in national, provincial or varsity level sports they were often away on road trips. On these trips they were often called upon to support heterosexual teammates who missed their boyfriends. Heidi explained how her isolation was intensified through consoling a love-sick heterosexual teammate:

I felt really caught up in the emotion thinking, "god, how incredible for you under all the stress that we're under here to be able to release to somebody about your personal life. And how a gay individual within the context of a straight world, the expectations of a straight world, has a hesitation about doing that or feels she can't." I noticed it just full force at that time, how I *wished* I could tell somebody about how much I missed my partner back home because it was *really* hard, really, really hard. (pp.25-26)

For two athletes who had relationships with their physical education teachers or coaches, feelings of isolation were also magnified. The ethical implications and precariousness of the teacher/student or coach/athlete relationship elicited increased feelings of being disconnected because they *had* to remain closeted:

She (my teacher) still wanted to sleep with me *and* with this other person at the same time when I was in high school. And I had *no-one* to talk to, I was forbidden to say anything. She's a teacher, she can get into big trouble so I didn't tell *anybody*. I didn't tell anybody until I got to (the city) and that was *two* years. (Kelly, p.25a)

Finally, the lack of positive and open discussion about lesbian sexuality among coaches and teammates contributed to their feelings of isolation. As described earlier the issue of lesbian sexuality was actively avoided and suppressed on their sports teams.

I: Do you think that homophobia makes lesbians in sport very isolated from each other?

P: Uh-huh, I think so 'cause you don't - it's not something you wanna go, you know, say "hi, I'm so and so, I'm gay, are you?" Yeah, I think it isolates you and I think that's maybe one of the reasons to this day why I'm very individual. You know? I'm just really isolated. (Tina, p.31)

The "everybody knows but nobody says anything" syndrome described by Griffin (1992b) works to isolate lesbians through sanctioning silence around lesbian issues. I do not believe that all the athletes necessarily wanted to remain secretive and isolated, rather the regulations of the heterosexist institution of sport have stigmatized lesbian sexuality so much that lesbians are discouraged from 'coming out.' All the participants described feeling isolated and disconnected from people and places that might unconditionally accept them as lesbians. Often they expressed the need to have someone to talk to, however, in a sports environment where lesbian existence is made invisible through silence and denial they perceived that they were alone, had no-one to share their lives with and were segregated from an affirming community.

Energy Drains

The internal and external restrictions placed on their lives often left these athletes feeling exhausted. The constant pressure they put on themselves to cover-up their lesbian sexuality or that they felt was put upon them by a homophobic

environment made it “really, really tough” because they felt they had to pass as heterosexuals.

P: I don’t want to pretend anymore. Now if I don’t have to pretend I’m not going to. It takes *too* much effort to put up that front.

I: Actually that’s a thing that I’ve heard from a lot of the women that have talked to me, they’ve talked about how much energy it takes. Do you feel drained sometimes?

P: Uh-huh, *totally!* (Tina, pp.23-24)

It was “tiring” and “so draining” to pass yet many also felt that they did not have the “strength to come out.” Despite the skill they developed in being “pretty good at the facade” many commented that it was tiresome to lead a “double life” and manage the “dancing routine:”

It can be so de-energizing when you have to change your behaviour and the things you say, almost a mind set, depending on the circle of people you’re exposed to. How do I protect my sexual identity from the wrath of my family? Well at some point you either take the risk and you expose yourself hoping that you are going to get support or you cower or you compromise constantly. It’s very de-energizing. It’s *incredibly* oppressive. (Heidi, p.21)

One of the most de-energizing parts of masking their lesbians identities was “having to feel like you had to date boys.” The pressure to conform to the heterosexual “norm” often left the participants vexed:

Most people in this world assume heterosexuality and I’m *sick* of that heterosexuality. And sometimes I get sick of *explaining* my sexuality over and over again or saying, “no, I’m not straight, I’m a dyke” and you know, this is the way I am. (Dara, p.5)

For some it was even difficult to play the “language police” take a risk to call people on homophobic attitudes because, as Aoife recalled, “sometimes you’re just *too* tired, sometimes there’s just *too* many of them! Feeling de-energized left many feeling “powerless” to respond to insidious lesbian bashing.

As a result of the stigma attached to lesbian sexuality by some of their coaches and teammates, many of their interpersonal relationships with these individuals, who were less than accepting, demanded energy to maintain. These relations were often "strained" and have "taken a lot out of (them)."

When I think about the *energy* that it probably took for me to maintain that (facade) it just makes me tired thinking about it now, you know? I know because I still use up a lot of that energy in my job. I can't be out, not in my division, not at my school, you know? And that takes a *lot* of energy that you could be using for other things. (p.13)

I think this lack of energy to do other things is another key element in how heterosexism persists. Keeping lesbians pre-occupied with hiding and maintaining the secrecy of their lives prevents them from solidifying their collective experiences to challenge the status quo. All the participants expressed feelings of frustration, anxiousness and exhaustion from both covering up their identities as lesbians and keeping their emotions hidden and although this was not healthy to do, Aoife reflected that she would have been "a basket case all the time" if she had allowed these anxieties to control her life.

From their sports biographies it was apparent that all of these athletes thrived on the physical challenges that sport provided to them. They worked hard at pushing themselves to the physical limits. When they talked about 'energy drains,' however, they were not talking about an exhaustion brought about by their own volition. Dealing with their hostile environments caused a mental tiredness which for many appeared *more* de-energizing than all the physical effort that they had ever exerted in their sports. However, these athletes were all invested in being part of their teams so they continually exerted the energy into working to remain an integral

part of the team unit more so than the work their teammates and coaches did to dispel the rampant homophobia within sports.

Lesbian Anger

Athletes, however, did not always accept the “norm” and restrictions that a heterosexist society imposed on them. In contrast to feeling “de-energized,” some participants described feeling incensed at others’ who openly vilified lesbian sexuality. Aoife who endured many discriminatory comments from her coach desired a confrontation with her coach. She realized that “coaches have a lot of power and influence” and “it’s hard to just go crazy on them,” however, she welcomed the confrontation and anticipated that her coach would be in no doubt as to how the incessant ‘attacks’ on lesbian sexuality had affected her:

I would like to have a few words with her. I’ll start off pretty calm, cool and collected but it certainly won’t finish on a calm, cool, collected note. I’ll start calm and get really angry then finish off calm - totally devastate her - I can’t wait. I want her to know that she’s hurt me. (Aoife, p.27a)

The hostility expressed by others towards lesbians often enraged these athletes. When Dara heard a player wish a “bunch of fags” killed she recalled:

To wish that upon people that you don’t even know thousands of miles away - I was just flabbergasted that something so hateful would come out of somebody’s mouth. I just left, I was so mad, I was fuming. I was ready to explode and I’ll never forget her saying that. I lost total respect for her as a person. [...]. Like I was just so mad, I was enraged. I felt personally insulted and I felt that she was a very hateful person, it just floored me. (pp.32-33a)

Similarly, Tina described her irritation over the explicit harassment she experienced from a teammate:

P: I think I get worked up about her. Like sometimes I just feel like, you know, taking her against a wall and really wringing her neck,

you know? But then (my partner) says "she's not worth it." And she's right but I mean *when* is it worth it? *When* is it time to ex...

I: Explode?

P: Yeah! I've always thought I'm a better person. I'm not going to lower myself to her level and start talking about her or start rumors about her, you know? (pp.38-39)

Participants regularly felt "hurt," "upset," "bugged" and "frustrated" by the attitudes of others.

There's been lots of *little* incidences - "oh, my goodness, we can't have any of *that* on this team." It's the little comments like that, I'm just *not* prepared for them and immediately it's just the next order of business. It's hard to be objective about it. I am very insulted. (Aoife, p.23-25a)

For Tina frustration and anger increased when lesbian athletes on her team used her as a "scapegoat." For Sandra frustration often spilled over into her personal relationship, playing on the same team as her partner often increased the tension between them and that this prompted many arguments:

It made it difficult, you know, in terms of seeing that person everyday at practice and competing against each other for spots. I think we spent a *lot* of time being mad at each other and being mad at not being able to express our feelings or talk to people about this. (p.8)

Rather than resigning themselves to always compromising their identities, these athletes allowed themselves to be angry at those people and institutions that restricted their lives. Anger was a consequence of the restrictions they felt placed upon them both as women and lesbians in sport:

I get frustrated with the way things are for women. The male dominated society and men getting the better jobs, and more money, that sort of superior type of mentality? That, you know, men are the be all and the end all and women do the house-keeping and look after the family in society. Oh no, that's just too traditional for me! (p.50)

Participants were often incensed at missing out on sharing their lives with others and rage may have helped them defy their 'lot' as lesbians in the predominantly heterosexual institution of sport. Again the extent that they allowed themselves to be angry at the sports world or individual homophobes was mediated by how they made sense of 'who' and 'what' was most significant in impacting on their experiences as lesbians in sport. The restrictions they placed on their own lives also caused some to be annoyed at themselves for maintaining their invisibility and denying their lesbian lives:

P: It made me a lot angrier person than I used to be because I'm dealing with it now.

I: Angry at who or what?

P: Just angry. Well I think (pause) angry at not being able to express myself, not being able to tell people that I'd fallen in love with this person, you know? Like I can't tell anybody about it! I think that did a lot to me and the feeling like I was worth something and these people didn't - who were making me feel - whether they were consciously making me feel like I couldn't say anything or whether I was doing it, you know? I think that's part of the anger too.

I: So you were angry at them?

P: Yeah, I think so.

I: And angry at yourself?

P: Yeah. For not being brave enough to say anything about it.
(Sandra, pp.16-17)

It was clear in some participants accounts that they felt responsible and angry for their own agency, or lack thereof, in challenging the sports world. Some were annoyed at their own complicity in contributing to the 'poisonous environment.'

I don't think queer people gain greater acceptance by remaining silent and secretive about their sexuality. They might gain acceptance but they're not gaining acceptance as a queer person, they're being

accepted as a supposedly straight person. The only way a queer person can be accepted as a queer person is to be out as a queer person. In my belief, queer people are joking themselves if they think they can be quiet and kind of live the status quo straight life and be accepted as gay people. (Dara, p.8b)

In response to feelings of isolation from, and anger towards an intolerant heterosexual environment all the participants at some point in their lives endeavoured to make a connection with a community where they perceived they might feel unconditionally accepted.

Finding a Niche

One of the risks that these athletes took in their lives was to seek out an environment where they could be more open as lesbians. The following section describes how they made sense of this “niche” within their individual lives in the context of a predominantly heterosexist sports world. Seeking out a lesbian environment was definitely a risk-taking behaviour given the risks they perceived in being out as lesbians in sport. Like risk-taking behaviours, or strategies and internal restrictions, the extent to which participants explicitly sought out a ‘niche’ was shaped by the amount of ‘risk’ they calculated in exposing themselves as lesbians within, and outside a lesbian community. However, trying to find a niche where they would feel comfortable being themselves was a reaction to this risk. All of these athletes felt that in this ‘niche’ they would connect with individuals who would unconditionally accept them. Many really wanted to get out and meet some people but the invisibility of a lesbian community meant that, initially, they did not really know where to go to find this niche. When they did find it they anticipated that it would allow them to escape the restrictions they felt in their lives:

I enjoy hanging around with my gay friends. I also enjoy hanging around with my straight friends but when I'm with my gay friends it seems like I can be myself a lot more. I can talk about what I wanna talk about, or I can say what I wanna say. (Kelly, p.13a)

Seeking out a lesbian community gave them the opportunity to confirm their lesbian identities:

Now that I'm in the community more and I feel more comfortable about (being lesbian). I realize, "yeah, that this is what I am and this is what I like and I don't think I'm going to change! (Kelly, p.40a)

Many participants have also played on lesbian teams or participated in gay sports events. When Heidi talked about the Gay Games she competed in she remembered meeting "*incredible* people." For many athletes lesbian sport was attractive because; it was not as structured as their sports "career," "all-lesbian teams (were) a wonderful relief" and, socially, much more enjoyable because they could be 'out' with no consequences. Dara made sense of the relevance of participating in all gay events:

I'm going to the Gay Games in June and I'm very excited about it. I get to play (my sport) that has been part of my life for many years (and) meet people, that's always been an interesting part. But it's a chance to meet those people who have an interest in me, one is (the sport), the second is that we're both gay, or lesbian or queer.
(pp.11-12b)

They felt a "definite bond" with other lesbian players and although these friendships are based, at first, on the fact that they are all lesbians, some certainly reported feeling closer to new lesbian teammates than to their heterosexual teammates on other teams. Now they knew other lesbians existed, they could recognize lesbians in other sports and expect a "level of understanding" from these players. It was apparent that being able to share their stories and interpretations of their experiences with other lesbian athletes enriched their perspectives on their lives as lesbians in

sport. As a consequence many felt "so safe" and "so at ease" because they could now relate to others. Seeking out a niche helped some cope with the trauma of coming out:

P: One woman was great. She kind of took me under her wing (even though) they were all older than me and kind of very established in their ways.

I: (laughter) Established in their "dykeness?"

P: Very established in their "dykeness!" (laughter) And they were very kind to me. That was the one thing that struck me about the community was how kind and helpful everyone was once you helped yourself. It is really hard for some people to help themselves because until I told her, it was terrible, I had no-one. (Aoife, p.17a)

Finally having somebody on their side with whom they could 'hang out' and feel comfortable with was a relief to all these athletes. They could talk openly about their lives and relationships and, as Dara recalled, "wave at (their) honey without having to worry about what people think," knowing that others would understand their lives was invaluable. Playing on teams with other lesbian athletes who were 'out of the closet' allowed them more freedom to be out as lesbians:

Playing here and being out playing here and playing on an out team, like the experience of that was really, really good. Just being with all the (team), just being out - you can have your partner or your significant other or lovers, or whatever you want to call that person come to the (venue). You can talk about what you want to talk about. You don't have to feel like you're wondering who is passing judgement on you and whether they agree or disagree with your lifestyle. (Dara, pp.37-38a)

Similarly Heidi commented:

It was wonderful, the first time I was ever exposed to a community of lesbians when I realized there were other gay women out there, it was incredible. It was like a huge load had been lifted off my shoulders because now I could enjoy the sport and love it and play to my hearts content, *and* also know that I didn't have to cover everything anymore. (p.18)

"Finding a niche" in an affirming community offset some of the consequences these athletes described which they experienced through their sports participation.

Although these women strived to be accepted and affirmed in their lives they did not always perceive that a level of acceptance existed towards lesbians in sport. They were often overwhelmed and "de-energized" by the constant strategizing and uncertainty they confronted. The hostility they perceived and the compromises they experienced often provoked anger and frustration towards themselves and those who maintained the "poisonous environment." As they moved across their social spheres, they endeavoured to manage their lesbian sexualities with the precision that it required in a heterosexist and homophobic environment. In response to these compromises and oppressions they had all made a connection with individuals and groups where they perceived they could feel safe. From their accounts it was gratifying to see that all the athletes were now aware of how to "find a niche" in an affirming community where they could experience life as 'out' lesbians.

Part Three - Discussion

As researcher I have attempted to describe the experiences of these athletes as they articulated them in their accounts. The more I looked at, and re-read their accounts it was clear that their stories highlighted three main descriptive areas; what their experiences were as lesbians in sport; given these experiences how they negotiated their lesbian identities in sport; and how they made sense of their experiences, in other words, why did they think they, as lesbians, had they experiences they did in sport.

I grouped their experiences, strategies and interpretations under sub-categories which I felt most illustrated or captured the essence of what they were describing. However, these areas and the sub-categories described within them are obviously not separate. On the contrary they intertwine to inform the 'whole' experience of each of the participants. The participants situated within their experiences further blur the boundaries as their agency determines the impact that their lesbian experiences' 'play' in their lives as athletes.

As stated previously the athletes have described their interactions with their coaches and teammates at the micro level. These experiences have made each athlete aware of the discriminations towards lesbians in sport. To this point the sub-categories have described the range of experiences and strategies, and the athletes' interpretations' of why these discriminations take place at the micro level. In their interpretations they made sense of why coaches, teammates and sports associations discriminated against lesbian athletes; lesbians are a threat to male ego and power, others lack understanding and courage to challenge 'norms'; homophobia is internalized, others fear difference which is manifested through avoidance and backlash. In addition, they also talked about how society shapes discriminations through the expectations and sanctioning of heterosexuality. These last two interpretations move us beyond the micro level to the macro level, to the sports institution, an institution which reproduces the values and norms that are shaped by a predominantly heterosexual society.

In this section I will show how their many experiences, strategies and interpretations interconnect to form categories of experiences which inform and impact on their lives as lesbian athletes. Each lesbian athlete in this research has

participated in sport, some continue to do so at an elite level despite the discriminations they have confronted. At this point it needs to be acknowledged again that the athlete's individual agency has determined how they act and react to being a lesbian athlete in a homophobic sports world. It is clear that having looked at how sport was/and is a central focus in their lives that they are driven by an achievement to succeed and have forced themselves at times to put up with the homophobia.

Openness

In their individual lives they have also experienced a degree of "Openness" and acceptance from family, friends and colleagues for their participation in sport, and for when they have 'come out' as lesbians. This explicit support has obviously impacted on how they feel about being lesbian (i.e., "it's not so bad") and more so allowed them to lead a more "normal existence" because with support they have been able to participate in sport, in the knowledge that some others think that "it's okay to be lesbian." However, "Openness" has only been part of their experience. Overwhelmingly, these lesbian athletes have confronted negative attitudes towards lesbians in sport, and have had to strategize to cope with these attitudes. It is to these experiences that I will now turn and describe how I see them shaped at the micro level by heterosexist sports institution at the macro level which constructs and sanctions heterosexuality as the 'norm.'

Resistance (Institutional)

The sub-categories of assumptions and sanctioning of heterosexuality, pathologizing, avoidance and confrontations (which includes speculation,

stereotyping, disassociation from the lesbian label, differential treatment of lesbians and attacks) are ways in which I feel a heterosexist society regulates sameness and the “compulsory” nature of heterosexuality (Rich, 1986). In the interpretations section; making sense of social expectations and how male power influences attitudes towards lesbians and women in sport where posited as reasons why this regulation of sameness takes place. These sub-categories form a core-category which informs and shapes these lesbian athletes experiences’ in sport, a category which I have chosen to call “Resistance.” As heterosexism has been defined as “the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving and thereby it’s right to dominance” (Lorde, 1984), this “Resistance” is institutionalized and regulates what is allowed to be included or embraced in society and, therefore, restricts those outside the norm of heterosexuality. Lesbian athletes progress is limited through the sports institution, not in terms of their sporting progress or success because they have learned to ‘pass’ so well as heterosexuals, but in terms of them openly identifying as lesbians in sport.

The experience of oppressed people is that the living of one’s life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction. It is the experience of being caged in: all avenues, in every direction, are blocked or bobby trapped. (Frye, 1983, p. 4)

Resistance takes place at the micro level, for example Kelly’s team espoused the principle, “you can skate if you’re straight.” However, the category “Resistance” (at the institutional level) demonstrates that prejudice does not operate simply at the level of what Devlin (1991) labelled “intentional vulgar hostility.” While it is true that these athletes experiences’ are influenced by individual

homophobic teammates and coaches at the micro level, it is essential that the “heterosystems” (Durocher, 1991) ‘resistance’ is exposed for what it is, a deep-rooted ideological premise that constructs ways in which we understand sexuality. Prentice (1994) theorizes “resistance” to mean, “the active and passive processes and practices which obstruct campaigns for visibility, recognition and power made by women, people of colour and other marginalized peoples” (p.1). Although Prentice refers to “resistance” as a means by which ‘chilly climates’ in universities are maintained, I feel this “resistance” also explains how heterosexism impacts on these lesbian athletes experiences. Prentice continues:

.... If we do not theorize resistance, we may attribute practices of exclusion as primarily the individual responsibility of individual people. This is of course, partly true; many individuals exercise active control and personal agency defending both the current power structure . . . and their place in it . . . however, . . . institutionalized resistance . . . is systemic and self-reproducing. (pp.1-2)

“Resistance” is not independent of social context, it is not neutral but can be explained through what Whitson (1984) describes as a “hegemonic order,” an “order” which has the potential to reproduce dominant ideologies. In this case ‘resistance’ resists threats to the order and normative status of heterosexuality. When the athletes talked about “struggling” and battling” with the stigma of their lesbian identities it made me visualize a hostile environment in which their sexuality is under siege. Pharr (1988) cites Rich (1982):

We are confronting not a simple maintenance of inequality . . . but a persuasive cluster of forces, ranging from physical brutality to control of consciousness, which suggests that an enormous potential counterforce is having to be restrained. (p.40-41)

This restraining of lesbian visibility and affirmation in sport is accomplished by institutionalized heterosexism, or what Hennessy (1993) described as

"heteronormativity." The interactions between these lesbian athletes and their coaches, and teammates which reproduce experiences such as, assumptions of heterosexuality, pathologizing lesbians, avoiding lesbians and confronting lesbians, and restrict lesbians 'coming out' and are "practical expressions of (this) systemic power" (Prentice, 1994). In addition, the "hetersystem" has co-opted 'homophobia,' categorizing individuals who cannot accept lesbians, as homophobic. Personalizing the discrimination is myopic and ignores systemic oppression which radical feminists have theorized as not personal or incidental but the consequence of challenges to heterosexual hegemony (Kitzinger, 1987).

"Resistance" is also demonstrated in the backlash towards lesbians in sport who openly defy the status quo and 'come out.' As more lesbians 'come out' there is a rise in negativity, this visibility is threatening because the power to define and control lesbians through homophobia is weakened. 'Out' lesbians take control over their own naming and diminish the power of homophobia. This 'flaunting' is not tolerated because it is seen as a celebration of deviance. As this backlash has progressed there is an increased focus on 'feminizing' and 'heterosexualizing' women's sport. The pink uniforms of one of the recent Canadian women's ice hockey team's at a world championship is a manifestation of these actions to regulate the femininity and heterosexuality of women athletes.

Tolerance

Although the 'compulsory' nature of heterosexuality has been denied by the predominantly heterosexual society, the social construction of sexuality has been "unmasked" (Durocher, 1991):

Faced with this potential threat, heterosociety must quickly cover the track of its construction, either by imposing a severe repression of homosexuality or by integrating it into its discourse. (p.14)

This integration is what I see as the category of "Tolerance." It neither is subsumed with the core category I call 'Resistance' neither does it belong in "Openness" because rather than celebrate sexual diversity it implies that something *has* to be tolerated or accommodated. Tolerance is controlled and granted by a "resisting" heterosystem. Although 'tolerance' is not in the category I call 'resistance' it is key to 'resistance' because, on a certain level, it allows for assimilation to take place into the heterosystem, it is conditional on having 'fit in.'

The heterosystems' resistance has the capacity to "absorb and transform critical and dissenting positions and discourses to fit its own image and, in doing so, defuses any threat to its own existence" (Durocher, 1991, p. 14). The subversion and appropriation of lesbian "chic" into the heterosexual mainstream reflects this transformation. Lesbian "chic" has entered our consciousness through media representations (especially in magazines such as Vogue and Newsweek) of the "new" post-modern, post-feminist, post-butch, post-granola lesbian. Lesbians *may* be tolerated in heterosexual culture somewhat auspiciously by reinforcing the notion that "they (lesbians) are just like heterosexual women except for who they sleeps with," and are popularly labeled a "lipstick-lesbians." This co-optation is what Kitzinger (1987) and Pharr (1988) described as "assimilation" into heterosexual culture. When one athlete talked about how her teammates 'tolerate' the good players rather than the ones that look like stereotypically lesbian, it illustrates how this 'tolerance' works. It accepts lesbians if they look and act

heterosexual! In addition, when players said that they were accepted but not ‘out,’ again we see how tolerance is conditional on ‘fitting in.’

Uncertainty

The categories of ‘Resistance’ and ‘Tolerance’ shape the category “Uncertainty.” The sub-categories of uncertainty and risk form this category. The mixed messages that the athletes receive, from openness to attack, generate uncertainty, they are always second guessing themselves, i.e., “is it safe to be out?” Kinsman (1995) stated that ‘homosexuality’ was constructed as a “risk” in the 1940’s, a threat to the Canadian National Security State. I would argue that this risk continues to be constructed in societal institutions, like sport, where lesbians are deemed a risk, and a threat to team dynamics and cohesion. For each athlete there were differences in the level of ‘uncertainty’ they experienced because some of them chose to confront the uncertainty and risk head on by ‘coming out.’ I feel the category ‘uncertainty’ is tied to the athletes degree of ‘outness.’ Many of the athletes reported that they did not know if the hostilities were directed at them because they were not always explicitly ‘out’ as lesbians. When they were ‘out’ then they knew definitely whether the homophobia was directed at them, therefore, in a way being out had somewhat less uncertainty. I believe that homophobia has more control over those who remain in the closet because the risks of being ‘outed,’ ‘identified,’ or speculated about are overwhelming.

‘Resistance,’ ‘Tolerance,’ and “Uncertainty” can be viewed as social constructions which force these lesbian athletes to acquiesce to, or defy “compulsory heterosexuality.” Therefore, lesbians in sport have to constantly negotiate their lesbian identities because these constructs are often changing, either compromising

to ‘fit in,’ or challenging “heteronormativity” through acts of defiance. Even within these there is a range of action dependent on the individual and their social situation.

Compromises

The combined ‘forces’ of ‘Resistance,’ ‘Tolerance,’ and ‘Uncertainty’ impact on the strategies that the athletes engaged in to negotiate their lesbian identities in sport. Retreating into sameness, silence, secrecy, withdrawal, internal restrictions and accepting personal losses form the category I have chosen to call, “Compromises.” “Compromises” are the “non-mutual relinquishment of principles, and power in order to ‘fit in’ (Webster’s Third New International Dictionary). “Compromises” illustrate the concessions and adjustments that the lesbians athletes imposed upon themselves to assimilate into heterosexual culture.

Studies of the identity accounts elicited from members of other oppressed and socially marginal groups have consistently revealed identity accounts which involve direct acceptance of the majority stereotype. (Kitzinger, 1987, pp. 90-91)

Furthermore, Pharr (1988) suggests:

The messages that society gives lesbians [...] are that we are sick, immoral [...]. It is very, very difficult to grow up in the midst of this constant bombardment of all these messages without internalizing any of them as true. Yet when we do take them in, we do damage to ourselves and put severe limits on our freedom to achieve everything we can be in the world. (p. 69)

Although this internalizing may account for some of the lesbian athletes ‘compromising,’ I do not believe that any of these athletes considered their lesbian sexuality a sickness. However, their sport was/and is *so* important to their sense of self that they were ultimately prepared to relinquish their lesbian identities in order to continue competing.

Defiance

In contrast to “compromises”, the sub-categories of ‘reversing tolerance,’ ‘risk-taking,’ ‘anger’ and ‘finding a niche’ constitute the category of “Defiance.” Here the athletes embrace their lesbian identities, defiantly refusing the pressure to remain invisible, and are challenging and explicitly rejecting “heteronormativity.” The sub-category of silence, also contained in “Compromises,” I believe may overlap into this category “Defiance.” Although the athletes are not telling the whole truth about their lives (compromising their identities), in ‘secrecy’ they are taking some control over what they are telling and who they are telling it to, therefore, defying the power of the heterosystem to silence lesbians. In this way I see that the lesbian athletes are not victims as such but can act in such a way to survive in a heterosexist sports world despite the hostility they confront, they are what Pharr (1988) referred to as “miracles of survival” (p.67). I feel the participants very participation in sport, and the successes they have achieved, as in itself an act of ‘defiance.’ They have infiltrated the bastion of masculinity and used sport to empower themselves as women athletes.

I see these compromises or defiant acts of the participants as mediated and shaped by their own experiences, age, the culture they have lived in and their feelings about being lesbian.

I think with all the things that you experience in your life it makes you who you are today. I thinks it's the social conditioning from when I was a kid to now. And making me the way I am. I don't necessarily think that I'm born lesbian, I don't buy that. I would be more tempted to say it is my experiences that have led me to this and my role models, the people that I've seen and had in my life.
(Meghan, p.50)

As stated previously in the section ‘lesbian biographies,’ many of these athletes “struggled” with their lesbian identities. These struggles have been shaped within the context of a society that advocates the “rightness and righteousness” of heterosexuality (Pharr, 1988). In this context it has been difficult for many of them to name and define their lesbian sexuality:

The stuff that I saw that happened [...] was pretty damn destructive around homophobic stuff. I found it very difficult to understand why. I mean I had no names for my homo-erotic relationship [...] that’s exactly what it was. I look back on it now and laugh. I mean it wasn’t as if there was something that would be painfully obvious, but it was obvious to (my lesbian coach). She just cracked up, she goes “oh hell, I knew you would be out, just give you two years!” [...]. When I think about it, I look back on my sport career, as a time of being very comfortable with other women - I mean sure people would say I probably flirted outrageously with a few, which was quite true - and yet you know, the most significant relationships were always with women, but it wasn’t until I got out, that I came out. [...]. I mean I guess, you know, that was the irony. The fact that I don’t think, I mean I wasn’t putting a name to them but that’s where I was turning for comfort and support, it was always women and friends on the team. (Julie, pp.9,12)

When they saw others not leading open lives they knew that being a lesbian was a ‘no-go’ area because there were just so many messages, like “you’re all a bunch of dykes,” influencing them to remain invisible. It was precisely because of these messages that they felt they might be “thrown aside” given their identities. For many the ‘essentialness’ of sport in their lives meant they were not prepared to ‘come out.’ This varied across participants. I cannot make a generalization and say, for instance, that the younger athletes were more closeted or who compromised the most. This is not true, in fact two of the participants under 25 engaged in the most risk taking behaviours. However, I do believe that ‘age’ is a factor which shapes some of these athletes desires to be ‘out’ and age is inexorably tied to some athletes careers. Three of the participants, over 30 years old, are teachers. Even though they

know they cannot be sacked because they are lesbians, they were aware of how precarious a lesbian teacher's situation is. For these women, and a couple of the younger athletes, there was a desire to participate in an non-homophobic sports world but they were comfortable enough to keep their lesbian lives fairly private, their lesbian sexuality was only a part of who they were:

Other players would suspect now about me just in terms of my sexual identity but nobody's every asked me if I was. If they did ask me, I guess it would depend on who it was, you know? (Meghan, p.27)

Yet even within each account there were contradictory messages about how they felt about being lesbian juxtaposed with their desire to be 'out.' This is illustrated in the following account:

I'm not so worried about what people are going to think any more. They're entitled to their opinions. I know what I'm about and I'm a lesbian. But I still like to hang around with both crowds so I can be a part of both teams, and I'm still not willing to you know, sit down, or wear a sign saying "yes, I'm gay." I don't think it's really any of their business, or with having to do with playing with them. I think I'm an athlete first to them, and being gay second. But I'm not willing to give up that information to them. (Kelly, p.7b)

It is clear that the 'uncertainty' that they spoke about impacted on their desire to let others know they were lesbians as did, for example what one athlete described as her, "political consciousness." The athletes who ascribed to what could be labelled a political agenda (i.e., feminist, socialist-feminist) were the most explicitly 'out' among all the participants, and were the ones who engaged now in the most explicit risk-taking behaviours:

I: How does being queer affect other areas of your life?

P: It just affects the way I look at life totally. It does, like how can't it? It shouldn't but that's the way society makes it, so no matter how hard you try, unless, you want to fit into the norm. But I don't want to be part of the status quo, I've never been part of the status quo

[...] and I don't like society and it's norms. [...]. I think being queer is going to affect my life and my career, I think it does. I think it affects more how I look at life more than how people look at me. (Dara, pp.42-43a & 2b)

Again, however, these more political lesbians are reconstructing their experiences retrospectively, even through their accounts it was evident that these athletes placed restrictions upon themselves. Aoife stated:

I've never been in a situation where I had to really go on the offensive and in situations where that could've happened but I've chosen not to was because that was mostly in my third year when I didn't have the confidence, just didn't have the conviction that I have now. [...]. I wasn't confident enough with my own lesbianism to assert myself in my teams presence. (pp.40a & 1b)

Similarly Dara recalled:

I think I've very much changed. Part of it has to do with getting older, more life experiences and meeting different people. I think coming out in high school while involved in sports is a really hard thing to do. [...]. I was just so paranoid at the time, not paranoid about talking to (another lesbian player) but paranoid with myself, I was unsure with myself and like it would take someone to have a level of comfortness with their own sexual identity before approaching somebody else. And right now I am at the point where I don't care if people out me. I am also more confident than when I was in (my home city) so I don't care if kids that I've worked with before or people on my (sports) team who I played with know that I'm a dyke. Like they know me, and this is what I wish I was like 3 or 4 years ago but I wasn't and you can't go and change things. I'm sure that if I was more out when I was in (my home city) I might still be (there) but that's the way the ball bounces. I think it's also a phase that I had to go through in life to be out and feel more confident. (Dara, pp.36a,54a & 6b)

Although these athletes did 'retreat into sameness' and were silent about their lesbians identities in sport they did not, except for Julie who did not label herself explicitly a lesbian while in sport, attempt to 'normalize' their lesbians identities to the extent of the other participants.

Interestingly, I also found that geographical location impacted on these athletes experiences. Generally, the participants who lived in Vancouver and Toronto were more 'out' as lesbians. The account of one participant who lived in both Winnipeg and Vancouver illustrated how the two cultures had influenced her experiences.

Coming to Vancouver, maybe the whole thing with getting away from home and the whole place where you've grown up, to somewhere where no-one really knew me. It just seemed easier to come out on the (sports) team, at work, and also because it's a lot more 'out' in Vancouver. [...]. It's easier for me to come out to new people or to people I just meet. I think that even in the year that I've talked to you I been able to be out more. So I'm pretty happy about that. In Vancouver queer culture is a little bit more out there so I find it's easier. [...]. Probably b/c of the distance. I know that I'm in Vancouver and I don't have to face these people everyday. And I felt that if I moved to Vancouver then I would feel more, you know, I would feel more confident. And I have felt more confident. (Dara, pp.2,3,6b)

It was clear that the bigger city provided her with more opportunities to participate in lesbian culture.

It was clear when they described their stories that all these athletes experienced similar mixed messages across their sports. The strategies they used to deal with them (either compromise or defy) were informed by their various social locations. Many of their reconstruction's, however, were exactly that, informed retrospectively by their age, experience, geographical location and political identities. Despite their social situations they were all affected, at some point in their lives, by the restrictions that were imposed on them by the 'poisonous environment' and which they placed on themselves.

Satellites

Three sub-categories which could not be included in the conceptual categories are "isolation," "energy drains" and "personal losses." I believe that these sub-categories were adequately described, however, they did not fit, analytically, with the conceptual categories. These sub-categories reflect the consequences of "resistance," "uncertainty," "tolerance." Although, there were other consequences of these conceptual categories, for example, compromises and defiance, "isolation," "energy drains," and "personal losses" did not fit these categories, they almost reflect the "consequences" of "compromises" and "defiance." Although some isolation was self-imposed as a strategy for dealing with the 'poisonous environment' (and, therefore, could be placed in the sub-category 'withdrawal'), isolation described more the feeling these athletes had when they thought they were the "only ones (lesbians)!" Like wise "energy drains" describes the consequences that the individuals felt having to deal with "resistance," "uncertainty," and "compromises." "Personal losses" reflect the consequences incurred while participating within the often "poisonous environment" of sport. These three sub-categories require further examination in future research to determine whether they are "tools" of 'resistance.' They may be ways to keep lesbian athletes pre-occupied in sport, regulating their connections to other lesbians, their energy to challenge sanctioned heterosexuality in sport, and their opportunities to share their lives with their teammates.

In conclusion, these athletes have obviously succeeded in their sports, and some hope to continue to achieve in sports for some time yet. As athletes they are in control of how they act in their sports. However, as lesbian athletes they have

experienced other social forces which have impacted on their athletic identities. The categories of "resistance," "tolerance," "uncertainty," "compromises" and "defiance" clearly inform their experiences as athletes within a sports environment which constantly reproduces institutionalized "heteronormativity."

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS

"Dreams . . . are full of our memories and lived experiences . . . they are also the visions that we carry around with us to keep ourselves from falling into the traps of silence, complacency and despair . . . Ultimately dreams are about the possibility of a world where we are none of us oppressed because we are no longer participating in oppression - our own as well as that of others." (Naomi Guilbert, 1993, pp. 5-6)

Despite the challenges that I have encountered in the research process (Appendix D) this process was both illuminating and valuable for me and has produced many questions to be explored. I look forward to 'filling in gaps' with further research and am excited that this process is the first step, for me, in challenging the "heteronormativity" that exists in the institution of sport.

It is essential that we do not victimize these athletes as their agency affects how they act and react to their experiences. More work needs to be done on asking lesbian athletes to recall/reconstruct their realities in sport *and* more importantly on how they understand what happens to them (as opposed to just re-telling their experiences). This may give us a clearer understanding of how their lesbian identities and social situations interact with their sports.

One of the questions I keep asking myself is, overall, do these athletes lesbian identities really influence their participation in sport? Many of the athletes (lesbian) identities were not seen as integral to their sports identities which seemed more crucial to them as athletes. At an elite level where the stakes are high does being lesbian intrinsically affect their empowerment and achievement as athletes? Martina Navratilova has been the exception rather than the rule I believe for lesbian athletes. Yes, there are athletes who will defy homophobia and heterosexism

through risk-taking behaviours. However, when you hear "I don't want any women like *that* (read lesbian) on my team," it is difficult not to internalize the feeling that you do not belong in sport; that sport is not a place that wants you as a lesbian athlete; that your teammates and coaches do not want to hear about lesbians; that you, without a doubt, have to fit in if you want to compete with your team.

As I reflected on all the participants' accounts it became apparent to me that despite how the participants have moved on, stepped forward, and became more comfortable with themselves as lesbians, it seems that they are the ones that are making the changes to 'fit,' not sport. It has not, as Bull (1995) noted, "got any easier" for lesbians in sport in terms of the homophobic atmosphere that exists there. I believe that it appears easier because lesbians, as they become more comfortable with their own identities, make accommodations to put up with homophobia. For instance, even though one participant had made great strides in terms of accepting her lesbian identity the year after our first interview, she was playing on a team that was more homophobic than her previous team, her team's motto was "you can skate, if you're straight." So she still had to put up with the blatant homophobia, sport was not changing for her. Sport is not mirroring her lesbian self-acceptance. For her, in the last 2 years, in fact, sports homophobia has become more vicious, it is the degree to which lesbians can put up with it that makes their achievements possible. The athletes put up with homophobia, or they leave sport and play other sports or they go to lesbian teams to feel more comfortable but the essence of homophobic sport has not changed. When they go to a lesbian team, they go there because it is more comfortable, but it does not change what they have left or withdrawn from. They are just taking themselves away from

the situation, or coping with it better. Sport is still homophobic, it is still discriminatory, and it is how lesbians put up with it that changes. It is essential that some of this responsibility, for changing heterosexist attitudes, is placed within the institution of sport and on those individuals that contribute to homophobia within sport.

In addition, the culture of sport epitomizes conservative ideals and the incentives to conform are greater than the incentives not to conform. It is also important to further explore the construction and maintenance of 'conservatism' and 'discipline' in sport. These processes may be tools to resist challenges to the hegemonic structure of sports, and deny athletes a forum in which to raise or express their political consciousness. It is also important that these athletes want their political consciences raised, therefore, sport must encourage and provide a space for these challenges.

Visions

As a result of all their experiences the athletes had very clear visions of what a safe and affirming sports environment would look like for them. It was suggested that changes needed to take place at both the micro level (coaches and teammates) and the macro level (the culture of sport which reproduces heterosexism) in order for sport to become an equitable space for lesbians.

Having felt detached from a safe space where they could express themselves as lesbians, one of the first steps these athletes would take to create an affirming environment would be to establish support groups for lesbian athletes in sport:

I wish that somehow I had known about some group, some support group or some other lesbians in sport that were at a high level. And (who) I could talk to and just find a home basically, find a niche. That would've been wonderful. (Aoife, p.47a)

One athlete stated that “it would’ve been interesting to hear from (others) when you’re 19, you know, ‘it’s okay to be a lesbian, you don’t have to worry about that’!” In addition at the micro level it was suggested that sexuality should become more of a “non-issue” on teams, they perceived that this would increase the level of acceptance. The athletes wish for a sports world in which sexuality diversity is embraced, where ‘heteronormativity’ is not exclusively sanctioned and where they can be themselves:

The idea of just being able to be really comfortable with what’s going on and who I’m with is really appealing because I think that’s what I would’ve liked. That probably would’ve made me most happy I think at the time to be able to just say, “this is who I am, this is who I’m with.” (Sandra, p.31)

It is a fact of life that lesbians are everywhere and lesbians are in sport and the message that was conveyed by these athletes was “let’s deal with it and support each other and make stronger people of each other.” At the micro level athletes talked about advocating responsibility for change to heterosexuals. Many of these athletes recalled that they engaged in ‘compromising’ to hide from the wrath of a poisonous sports environment *and* to alleviate the discomfort that their heterosexual teammates felt, for instance, in the locker rooms and showers with their lesbian teammates. This responsibility of alleviating stress needs to be removed from lesbian shoulders and put onto heterosexual’s shoulders. Heterosexual coaches and teammates should accommodate lesbians more because, presently, the effort is very one-sided. Heterosexuals should be responsible to challenge the assumptions of heterosexuality that pervade sport.

You know it would be nice if no one would assume that everybody’s straight or no one would assume that everybody is gay and people would just ask the questions they feel comfortable to ask. Like “so are you seeing someone?” Instead of “do you have a

boyfriend?" And be brave, open enough to talk about sex and sexuality. The world would be a much better place if everybody would accept everybody for who they are and not what they looked liked and who they slept with, and just get over it! (Dara, pp.5-6b)

These athletes were also aware of their own agency and responsibility for the current situation in sport, believing that if they had the courage to be more 'out' then people would just have to be more accepting.

I want to bring together the two worlds (sighs). I know that we can never have a lesbian separatist state, although that would be wonderful and everything (laughs), however, not to be talked about realistically, obviously. So we're going to learn to exist together but that doesn't mean that one group just lies down flat for the other group to walk all over them. (Aoife, p.49a)

Coach education is also an essential component in changing the "poisonous environment." Coaches must be made to "understand that lesbians are not different people" and must be more sensitive and open to the notion of a 'continuum of sexuality.' Sensitive coaches will play an essential part in welcoming diversity, stopping homophobic attitudes, and challenging stereotypes and heterosexist assumptions:

P: I think if you have a coach that is very open and respectful of their athletes then I think that reflects on the rest of the team too and it helps people change their views on things. And if like a coach is not homophobic or heterosexist then people learn from that and can help the players on the team

I: The coach kind of role models behaviour for others?

P: Yeah, *exactly*, that's it. (Dara, pp.59-60a)

Similarly, Heidi stated:

Anybody who is in a position to be a role model has the responsibility and should have the inbred desire to impart mutual acceptance of people from diverse backgrounds and diverse experiences. [...]. I think it is really important to make people aware of what the lesbian experience is. (pp.36-37)

Aoife was adamant that her homophobic coach be “regulated” in some way, “someone has to police her because she’s hurting a lot of people.” Will structures soon be in place within our university, provincial and national sports organizations for lesbians to challenge heterosexist harassment? Will lesbians have a say in regulating and policing homophobic behaviour? There have been many strides made in confronting sexual harassment in sports perhaps challenging heterosexism will be the next step? One way to challenge heterosexism will be to insist on more rigorous coaching education within the sports institution:

The NCCP (National Coaching Certification Program) addresses so many things but it doesn’t address sexuality in sport. There should be some sort of stipulation - you can start with Sport Canada - if you’re going to be a national coach and be funded by Sport Canada that you have to go through some sort of clinic ((laughs)). Even just an informal panel discussion of what it’s like - with queers sitting on the panel, someone who’s comfortable with being out in sport - to be queer. *Something* that would address it would be a step. (Dara, pp.46-47)

These structural changes in coaching will include increasing the number of women coaches in elite sport. These visions move beyond the micro level and challenges the macro level, the heterosexist and sexist world of sport which ‘produces’ coaches. Sports are “very much an old boys network,” perhaps women coaches will be more accepting of lesbian athletes:

One thing I think it’s very, very important for women to coach female athletes. Because the fewer women you have coaching female athletes, the women are getting a ‘double whammy.’ They’re not having a role model who’s a woman and secondly they may not have the sensitivity of that coach for their alternative lifestyle. I’m not saying women, straight women have any more support for a lesbian athlete as a male would but based on my experience, and the experience of those athletes closest to me, they have all said that that is their experience. So I think it’s of paramount importance that women athletes have a woman role model who is a coach. The best woman for the women’s job. (Heidi, pp.42-43)

It is ironic that most of these athletes experienced less than tolerant attitudes from their female coaches, and in their accounts some did acknowledge that, generally, some male coaches were more accepting of lesbians than female coaches. Nevertheless many did advocate on the behalf of women coaches. For these athletes, the main vision is to have a coach who will consistently advocate acceptance and address sexuality issues is essential for creating an open and affirming climate for lesbians in sport. Ultimately micro changes will evolve when, at the macro level, the culture of sports stops resisting change and is attentive to the concerns of lesbians in sport. One athlete was adamant that “it’s a courage thing, it’s just the courage to depart from our social conventions” (Aoife, p.43a). Change will begin to occur when the compulsory nature of heterosexuality does not exist.

For so long when I was in sport I was called a dyke. I kept saying, you know, “I don’t know, I don’t know what I am, just leave me alone,” you know? And I think that’s what every kid would probably want. And when I started, you know, my shoulders were massive when I was 14, I was called a butch, called a dyke, clearly nobody liked it, clearly (it was) derogatory. I didn’t know what I was. *Damn it*, any kid should have the right to develop their own sexuality in the way they feel most comfortable. (Julie, pp.24-25)

Presuming everyone is heterosexual unless ‘proved’ otherwise forces lesbians to make a choice either to acquiesce to “compulsory heterosexuality” or not. Assumptions of heterosexuality exclude sexualities outside the so-called “norm” and give heterosexuals the opportunity to ignore difference. Although these athletes want to be embraced in society they do not always want to sacrifice their identities, however, they want to be able to, as Aoife stated, “walk down the street holding hands with our partners and not feel we are breaking any rules” (p.26).

Changing the “rules” would allow lesbians to continue to challenge heterosexist resistance. It is important that both lesbians *and* heterosexual women mobilize and continually challenge the dominant sports structures:

The political project I think is to change what the physical culture’s about. When I look at sport, I want a fundamental transformation. I don’t want equal access. I don’t think a liberal equal access approach will get us anywhere. I don’t think the women’s equal access project is getting very far. You’ve got to go back and say, “boys, you can’t do it that way, that’s not the physical culture that we should be putting public resources into.” And that’s the only way we’ll get supported anyway. “What are you doing going and beating each other up on the football field. Why do you support this? Why do we want to take little 5-6-7 year old boys, put on this equipment, and go bash your heads in?” (Julie, p.23)

Women in sport policies often do not go far enough to make this fundamental transformation, and rarely tie funding and equality to non-homophobic sport. Many policies do not come close to raising homophobia as an issue and often back away from it (Lenskyj, 1991). One athlete remarked that, “it’s going to take men who are willing to tackle masculinity before we really find openings for lesbians and women in sport” but that “it is essential that the gendered construct of sport changes:”

That’s why lesbians like the Gay Games because it’s a cultural celebration, it’s an identity, as opposed to a set of structural concerns. (Julie, p.24)

For lesbians the Gay Games and, for example, the “pink turf” soccer leagues in Toronto are alternative forms of physical culture. These spaces allow lesbian culture and community to be celebrated in a sporting atmosphere. However, Julie believes that if “we leave the future (of sport for lesbians) within those we maintain the ghetto.” While it is essential that “pink turf’s” remain part of lesbian sporting culture, it is essential that lesbians be allowed access to a physical culture that allows them to be empowered through their achievements:

(What we need) is a real sense of a cultural event as opposed to the nonsense of the Olympics. And to find a way in which I guess we can physically embrace our bodies, in a way that pushes them that does not involve competition? Anything you do in sport involves being in competition with somebody else, even if it's the clock. We claim we're only out there racing the clock, well let's be clear, we're set up. I mean it's going to take an awful lot to begin to reevaluate how we put physical culture together in a way that celebrates the homoerotic aspects of it, (and) that celebrates women's bodies in a way in which they feel in control. (Julie, p.21)

The vision for the sports world for all these athletes is one where they want to feel safe and affirmed as lesbians, and one in which they have access to resources and facilities to create a sports world in which “everybody could just be who the hell they were!”

In conclusion, it is essential that prejudice is de-stabilized. Teammates and coaches must reflect on taken-for granted assumptions, stereotypes and privileges and be proactive in making space for sexual diversity. This research which clearly documents lesbian athletes experiences can be used as a tool to educate and inform how institutionalized resistance impacts on lesbians experiences in sport. At the micro level there must be more opportunities created to both challenge the repression inherent in the ideology of sameness, and celebrate difference.

At the macro level, theoretically, it is essential that our emphasis remains on de-constructing “heteronormativity” and on building a utopia for lesbians in sport. We must continue to ask why there is so little tolerance for diversity and why heterosexism *and* homophobia are so central to our society? (Phelan, 1993). A commitment to a radical feminist theoretical framework provides a conceptual framework to analyze; the challenge lesbianism poses to the heterosystem; and how this is manifested in the inter-relations between sport and sexuality.

Furthermore, radical feminism critiques masculinist and positivist methodological frameworks, legitimates the articulation of women's stories, interprets and re-interprets them in ways that may link multiple positioned experiences. It is essential to acknowledge who have been the 'gatekeepers' of universal truth? We need to continually challenge the partiality and so-called 'objectivity' of malestream ethnocentric knowledge through the use of feminist methodologies and "methods from the margins." We need to situate ourselves in our research and understand how it impacts and changes our lives as well as the lives of the participants.

I feel that this research builds on a growing collection of works which are challenging and deconstructing 'compulsory heterosexuality' in sports. It is essential that this type of research continues to 'come out.' One athlete's remarks illustrate the effectiveness of this research:

I: Do you have any advice for me in terms of what you think I should be striving to do with this work for lesbians in sport?

P: I think it's really good what you're doing, in regards to that it's going to help people who, I guess, are in my position. The first time you interviewed me, I know I looked for a lot of literature on things, and there wasn't a lot out there, especially specifically with gays, or lesbians in sport. I guess that you really have to get it out there and make it available for people to read, I think it'll help people a lot. I don't know what other steps you could take, but I think what you're doing is important. (Kelly, p.22b)

The range of experiences, strategies and understandings described by the participants (Chapter Four and Five and summarized in Appendix C) illustrate the various aspects of these lesbian athletes lives in sport. Their lives are informed both by their own agency, whether they compromise to, or defy heterosexism and homophobia, and the institution within which they perform both as athletes and

lesbians. From openness to confrontations, individual homophobes and institutionalized heterosexism, the issues that emerged as these lesbian athletes reconstructed their experiences reveal the complexity of their lives and the dynamic forces which shape their lives as lesbian athletes within the institution of sport.

Finally, this research is committed to a vision of a more equitable and affirming sports world and recognizes that all individuals are entitled to the privileges which the "defined norm" control. We do not have the right to deny lesbians or indeed other marginalized peoples either the access to active living or the celebration of their empowerment through sport.

Recommendations

- (1) More theory, research and data collection needs to be done to represent a broader range of lesbian athletes across a variety of sports, and including lesbian athletes of colour and different social class.
- (2) We need to monitor the cultural supports that reproduce heterosexism and homophobia in sport such as, coach education, which can promote and maintain the poisonous environment for lesbians.
- (3) We need to explore the social-structural context of heterosexism and homophobia in sport and expand the roles of social institutions in preventing heterosexism and homophobia through sport policy initiatives which tackle heterosexism and homophobia in sports.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Schedule

Pre-interview points to be stressed when reading the consent form:

- Assurances that no identities will be revealed during the research (in the transcriptions or in the findings) but if you wish to go "off the record" the tape will be turned off and the information will not be used in the research.
- Schedule of questions is a guide to explore specific areas which are the focus of this research, we may not cover all the questions.
- I anticipate that the interview will last no more than an hour and a half, with time at the end to debrief.
- A copy of the interview and transcription will be available if requested. I hope that you will also be involved in the on-going process of the research and analysis, and will be interested in reading the final document.
- I anticipate (I hope!) that the research, which includes interviews, transcribing, analysis, re-interviewing, writing, will be completed by June 1995.

Interview #:

Researcher:

Date:

Time:

Location:

Record on tape before interview begins:

- I'd like to thank you for your interest in this research and ask you do you understand the research conditions that are set out in the consent form?
- I'd also like to confirm with you that you agree with having this interview tape-recorded and that you feel comfortable if I take some notes during the interview?
- The focus of the research is to explore how your sexual identity connects/has connected with your sports experience. However, can I start first of all by asking you to briefly tell me something about yourself?

Background information (Part 1)

1. How old are you?
2. What sport do you/did you play?
3. What level do you/have you participate(d) at in that sport? Is this the only sport that you participate/have participated in? What sport do/did you play at a university/provincial/national level and how many years will you continue to play/did you play?

4. Can you tell me briefly how did you get involved in sports? What attracted you to sports?
5. Have you always felt encouraged to participate in sports?
6. What did sport mean to you as you were growing up? Does it still mean as much to you? What do you gain/were you gaining from sport that makes you/made you want to continue making it a part of your life?

Sexual Identity (Part 2)

In this part of the interview I would like to talk about your sexual identity and the experiences that you have had in sport.

1. How do you define your sexual identity? What words do you use when you describe your sexual identity? How do you feel about your sexual identity?
2. Can you describe some of your experiences as a lesbian in sport? For instance;
 - a) Can you describe what it was like for you to be lesbian/gay/queer and participating in sports at a university/provincial/national level? What kinds of things happened to you as a lesbian in sport?
 - b) Where and When did most of your experiences occur?
3. Who was significant in your life in sport? How did they react to you being lesbian?
 - Did you "come out" to anyone in sports?
 - How did you go about this process?
 - Were you selective?
 - Did/do your team-mates or coach knew that you are a lesbian/gay/queer?
 - How do they know?
 - How did they find out?
 - How did/do the other players treat you?
 - Did you receive support from other players/coaches/administrators?
 - Were you in a position to be out as a lesbian, eg. scholarship, place on the team etc.?

- Was "coming out"/not "coming out" a safety issue for you?
- 4. How did you deal with your experiences? What was happening to you personally during your time in sports? How did you feel?
- 5. a) I wondered if we could talk about how you understand your experiences in sport. We hear a lot about what happens to lesbians/gays/queers in society and sometimes people can understand it in terms of talking about homophobia or heterosexism. Is that how you see it? Why do you think you have had these experiences in sport?
- b) How do you think homophobia or heterosexism works? Do you feel pressure to conform/not conform?
- 6. What have been the consequences for you dealing or coping with the experiences that you have had?

Future (Part 3)

- 1. With more celebrities "coming out" do you think that your experiences as a lesbian are changing? What do you see your future as?
- 2. What would you like to see happening in women's sports that might address your needs as a lesbian/gay/queer athlete?
- 3. Have you ever played on an all-lesbian team? Can you describe some of the similarities/differences that you have found with your other experiences? Would you like to play in the Gay Games? What do you think that would be like?
- 4. How does being lesbian/gay/queer affect other areas of your life? Is it easier for you to be lesbian/gay/queer in sports than in other areas of your life?
- 5. What would your world be like (without homophobia or heterosexism) if you felt you could express your sexual identity openly? (Guided fantasy!)

Debriefing (Part 4)

- 1. Would you like to explain in more detail anything that you feel was cut short in the interview?
- 2. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me that would help me understand your experiences in sport?
- 3. Perhaps in our next contact we can plan to explore other issues that might need further explanation and questions that arise out of this contact?

4. How do you feel about other people in your circle of friends knowing about your participation in this research? Are you concerned that they might recognize what you say?
5. How do you feel about this interview? Was it what you expected?

Thank the participant!

APPENDIX B



THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

FACULTY OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION
AND RECREATION STUDIESWinnipeg, Manitoba
Canada R3T 2N2**STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT**

Thesis research by Caroline Fusco

Thesis Advisor - Dr. D. P. Johns

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of lesbians in sport through their own subjective interpretations.

Participant's Consent

I hereby acknowledge that I have been informed as to the purpose of this research and I agree to participate in the study which is titled "Lesbians and locker rooms: The subjective experiences of lesbians in sport," conducted by Caroline Fusco (University of Manitoba, Winnipeg) for her MSc thesis.

I understand that my account will be tape-recorded in an interview, with the researcher, lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The option to refuse to be tape-recorded is also available. I understand that the text of the tape-recording will be transcribed to print for analysis and the tape-recording will be erased when the research is completed.

I understand that, as a participant in the study, I am a volunteer and that I may refuse to answer any or all questions without penalty, and that I may withdraw from the study at any time. If I choose to withdraw from the study I also have the option to withdraw the information that I have provided.

I understand that a second interview and further contact may be requested by both myself and the researcher. Also, I shall be given an opportunity to ask questions at any time during the study and after my participation is complete. I may contact the researcher by leaving a message at the Department of Physical Education and Recreation Studies, (phone) (204) 474-9747.

I understand that any information I provide in the course of this interview will be strictly confidential, and that my identity will not be revealed during any stage of the data analysis or in the publication of the research findings.

Having read and understood the nature of this research and my participation in it, my signature below signifies my willingness to participate.

Participant's signature

Date

Researcher's signature

Date

APPENDIX C

Categories

(1) Sub-categories:

Experiences

- openness
- acceptance
- support
- tolerance
- avoidance
- assumptions of heterosexuality
- sanctioning of heterosexuality
- pathologizing lesbians
- confrontations

Strategies

- retreating into sameness
- silence
- secrecy
- withdrawal
- reversing the tolerance
- risk-taking

Making Sense of the Sports World

- social expectations
- male ego's and power
- fear of difference
- internalized homophobia's
- lack of understanding
- lack of courage
- avoidance (manifestation)
- backlash (manifestation)

Making Sense of Individual Lives

- uncertainty
- risk
- external restrictions
- internal restrictions
- personal losses
- isolation
- energy drains
- lesbian anger
- finding a niche

(2) Conceptual Categories:

Openness

- openness
- acceptance
- support

Resistance

- avoidance
- assumptions and sanctioning of heterosexuality
- pathologizing lesbians,
- confrontations,
- social expectations
- male ego's and male power
- fear of difference
- internalized homophobia's
- lack of understanding and courage
- avoidance and backlash (manifestations)
- external restrictions

Tolerance

- tolerance

Uncertainty

- uncertainty
- risk

Compromises

- retreating into sameness
- silence
- secrecy
- withdrawal
- internal restrictions

Defiance

- reversing the tolerance
- risk-taking
- anger
- finding a niche

Satellites

- isolation
- energy drains
- personal losses

APPENDIX D

Challenges of the Research Process

I would like to briefly account for some of the challenges that I have encountered in the process of this research. It was ironic that one of the goals I had was to empower lesbian athletes yet I perpetually stammered when someone asked me "so what's your thesis about?" I felt at risk mentioning the 'lesbian' topic.

It took me from the first interview to almost the last interview to adjust and "play" with the interview guide, to make it more efficient. Despite its (the interview guide) development I don't think this has affected my research, or the validity of the interviews. I think it was naturally going to develop along with my development as a researcher. For example, few of my participants understood when I asked them the question "how do you explain/make sense of your experiences in sport? This question was central to my research and nobody understood it! I had to change it to, "*why* do you think these experiences that you have described have happened to you?" In this way I felt I still maintained the research focus.

Finding a diverse population of lesbian athletes was the biggest challenge. Although the participants vary across sports, age, experience, comfort with being lesbian and geographical location, there was no variation across race or class lines. At one point I tried advertising for potential participants. It was also a challenge, how could I make posters safe for me and potential participants? It was also important to find out where do lesbian athletes hang out?

Once initial contacts were made I had a battle with answering machines! It is difficult to describe one's master's thesis research in the time slot available on telephone recordings. I almost lost two potential participants this way.

During the interviews logistics like, the number of tapes/batteries became important as was the interview setting, i.e., would there be many distractions? Was it the participant's laundry night? Maintaining contact with the participants was difficult, do they want to be seen with me? Can I stop and talk to them? This often made it challenging to keep the research collaborative, and to keep participants informed of the research progress.

I found out that the data does not always "talk" to the researcher, that the process of analysis is long and arduous and not always clear! In addition, maintaining a neat filing system of process and content notes was difficult because of the amount of data generated. I did not want to 'cut up' the transcripts which may have assisted this filing process, so I had to be content with reading, and re-reading 'rainbow' coloured transcripts.

Finally I found that letting go of the process of research the most difficult of all, knowing that you should write and finish as soon as possible is a valuable lesson to learn.