

# The impacts of discriminatory experiences on lesbian, gay and bisexual people in sport

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the nature and impact of sexist and homophobic discrimination experienced by lesbians, gays and bisexuals (LGB) in Australian sporting settings. A mixed methods online survey was utilised to collate participant experiences. The findings suggest that, in sport, participants experienced sexism directly and systemically, and homophobia explicitly and implicitly. Women experienced sexism and homophobia, whilst men reported more homophobic events. The most mentioned impacts of discrimination were negative emotions such as sadness, anger, distress and shame, followed by negative engagement with sport such as disliking sport, or avoiding or leaving sport. The well recognised benefits of sport such as physical and mental wellbeing, social connections, enjoyment, positive identity and achievement may be more difficult to realise within this context of significant social stress.

Key words: sport, homophobia, sexism, minority stress, impact, lesbian, gay, bisexual

## Introduction

Stress is a general feature of everyday life, demanding cognitive and behavioural efforts to adapt and having a variety of emotional, behavioural and consequent health impacts on individuals. Stressors can be individual and emanate from personal events and conditions, and social, in which the social environment is an important source of stress that requires the individual to cope and adapt (Meyer 2003). Stress can also be acute (i.e. short-term, one off event) and chronic (i.e. long-term, inherent to an environment). According to Meyer (2003, 675) social stress can be particularly salient in the 'lives of people belonging to stigmatised social categories' in which prejudice and discrimination related social conditions such as lower socio-economic status, racism, sexism, or homophobia are more commonly and significantly experienced as stress inducing, requiring adaptation through coping responses, and having direct emotional and behavioural impacts.

This study is concerned with the social and participatory environment of sport (competition, training, social life and activities) and some of the key stressors in this social context for lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) sportspeople, such as discriminatory experiences of sexism, homophobia and heterosexism (characterised as heterosexuals' prejudices against same-sex attracted people culturally, institutionally and individually, resulting in the privileging of heterosexuality whilst devaluing LGB peoples (Herek 1996, Lee and Cunningham 2016). A more thorough understanding of social stress within the context of the sports environment (of which performance is one vital dimension) is important, because such stress will also have a significant impact on the sporting experience of participants.

A broad definition of sexism was used in this paper and was based on the definition framed by Ayim and Houston (1998, 327):

*Sexism is the effect of an action, policy, or practice which selects females (or males) as a class to receive unequal treatment... It may be intentional or unintentional – the test lies not in the intention but in whether the result has been to thwart equal treatment. Sexism may be either overt (that is, open or direct) or covert (that is, subtle or indirect).*

Considering the historical and continual imbalance of institutional power between men and women in most societies and in particular in sport, women are the main group that experience sexist discrimination. Furthermore, people with sexist views tend to endorse the perspective that men have greater status than women and that traditional roles, expectations and gendering behaviour of men and women should be upheld (Davies 2004, Whitley Jr 2001). Due to the relationship between negative gender stereotyping, sexism and homophobia, gay and bisexual men also experience lesser and often disparaging treatment based on the negative gendered stereotypes of gay men (“weak, more feminine” - like women). Lee and Cunningham (2016, pp 466) point out that sexism may actually undergird homophobia because ‘gay men and lesbians stereotypically do not abide by the gendered expectations of people who hold sexist beliefs’, which in turn activates this sexual prejudice.

Homophobia was first used by psychologist George Weinberg (1972, 4) as “the dread of being in closer quarters with homosexuals –and in the case of homosexuals, self-loathing”. This definition centres on individuals having an intense fear of male homosexuals, which discounts societal prejudice and sexual orientation as a diverse spectrum (Herek 2000, Sartore-Baldwin 2013). While there are many overlapping terms and definitions regarding anti-homosexuality, a more encompassing definition might be, homonegativity (Lottes and Grollman 2010). Homonegativity can include both old-fashioned (opposition based on moral and religious beliefs and misconceptions about homosexuality) and modern (opposition to homosexuality is overestimated and activists are making unnecessary claims, discrimination no longer exists) definitions (Lottes and Grollman 2010). Whilst homonegativity may be a more apt term to describe the variations of anti-homosexual feelings, thoughts and behaviours, homophobia is used in this paper due to its widespread usage and understanding in the wider community –and because of this it was the term used in the online survey of LGB sports participants in Australia.

### ***Social stress in the lives of LGB people***

Social stress is influential in the lives of LGB people and has been linked to adverse health outcomes. Research suggests that gay men and lesbians are at increased risk of mental health problems including anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicidal behaviour due to their experience of heterosexist and homophobic prejudice and discrimination (Cochran, Sullivan, and Mays 2003, Corboz et al. 2008, Cox et al. 2010, Meyer, Dietrich, and Schwartz 2008). Lack of societal support (e.g. family, education, employment protection) (Meyer 2003) and the perceived need to hide sexual orientation from others (DiPlacido 1998) also contributes to this stress and consequent negative health impacts. Meyer developed a conceptual framework for understanding this prevalence of negative health outcomes of which a key component is minority stress.

Minority stress refers to the excess stress individuals from stigmatised social groups experience due to their marginal social position. The underlying assumptions behind the broader understanding of minority stress theorised and researched within sociology and psychology are encapsulated by Meyer (2003, 677) as “(a) additive to general stressors that are experienced by all people, and therefore stigmatised people are required an adaptation effort above that required of similar others who are not stigmatised” ; (b) that minority stress is chronic in that the underlying social and cultural structures shaping this discrimination/prejudice are ongoing; and that (c) minority stress comes from social processes, institutions and structures beyond the control of or within the individual (no biological, genetic or non-social derivation).

Within Meyer’s theory, ‘distal’ stressors are considered external social conditions and structures which produce stressful contexts and events (prejudice events such as discrimination and violence). These can impact individuals in the form of ‘proximal’ stressors in the context of thought, feeling, and action (expectations of rejection, concealment, and internalised homophobia). Meyer (2003, 676) suggests three processes of minority stress relevant to LGB individuals within this distal– proximal framework. These are “(a) external, objective stressful events and conditions

(chronic and acute), (b) expectations of such events and the vigilance this experience requires, and (c) the internalization of negative societal attitudes.”

Another stress process unique to LGB people is the concealment of sexual orientation, which is a proximal stressor based on internal psychological processes and perspectives (Cole et al. 1996, DiPlacido 1998). Examples of distal stressors in sport for LGB people can include sexist and or homophobic verbal abuse and physical violence, systemic sexist discrimination involving lesser treatment based on gender and systemic heterosexist discrimination such as assuming everyone is heterosexual in a sports club and that heterosexuality is not only normal, but superior to homosexuality or bisexuality (Brackenridge et al. 2008). Meyer elaborates that the proximal stress processes are more subjective and relate to self-identity as LGB, which vary in the social and personal meanings individuals attach to these identities and the stress these subjective attributions may elicit. A variety of subjective stress processes may result for LGB people including being vigilant when socially interacting with others for fear of rejection, concealing their sexual identity due to concerns of harm, or internalising the negative stereotypes and prejudice (internalised homophobia).

### ***Research on LGB discrimination and impacts in sport***

Much of the research into the social stress and consequent impacts for LGB sports people has been sociological rather than psychological in orientation, emphasising the broader social-cultural context of sporting environments as well as the nature and impact of sexism (especially for women), homophobia, and heteronormativity (a bias towards opposite sex relationships, which are put forward as ‘normal’). The foundations of this literature are the socio-cultural history and significance of sport in western society. Broadly speaking, sport is predominantly a sex-segregated social institution based on conventional gender divisions and heterosexuality as a central organising principle (Kolnes 1995). Sports that demonstrate strength, power, speed and combat are considered the central shapers of dominant masculinity in present day western society (Connell 2008, Messner 2002). Connell theorises hegemonic masculinity as the most preferred and culturally exalted form

of masculinity in a given historical and cultural context, which acts to reinforce and maintain the patriarchal gender order. Reflecting on this hegemonic masculinity in Australia, Albury, Carmody, Evers and Lumby (2011) suggest that it is

...deeply embedded within archetypes (the brave Anzac digger, the sporting hero, the life saver) and specific rituals of sporting success and athletic heroism – acts that prove one is strong, courageous, aggressive, masterful, adventurous, tough, heterosexual, brave, honourable, competitive, capable, not intimate, not soft, not emotional and so on’

These valorised masculine qualities are especially enacted in the most pervasive and media covered sports within Australia, such as the football codes (Australian Rules in Victoria) and cricket, and mark out ‘preferred and disparaged forms of masculinity and femininity, instructing boys and men in the “art” of making certain kinds of men’ (Rowe and McKay 1999, pp 118).

Male athletes who do not perform well in sport or do not comport themselves in traditionally masculine ways may be labelled with derogatory names and expressions such as *faggot*, *queer*, *poof* and “*playing like a girl*” (Martens and Mobley 2005, Symons and Klugman 2014). This gender policing of traditional masculinity through sport also reinforces sexist and negative gender stereotypes that conflate gay males with femininity as well as the inferiority of being female. Sexism, negative gender stereotyping and homophobia in sport are mutually reinforcing. Martens and Mobley (2005) discuss how the gay male athlete often has to deal with open contempt for homosexuality from teammates, coaches, opponents and spectators. Back in 2005 Andersen documented the significant challenges faced by US elite and professional gay sportsmen. He concluded that men’s team sports are “steadfast in their production of conservative gender orthodoxy” (65) and institutionalised homophobia.

In comparison, by being involved in sports that are considered masculine (many team sports and sports involving power, strength, combat), sportswomen of all sexual orientations must affirm their femininity and heterosexuality to avoid the butch or lesbian stigma (Brackenridge et al. 2008, Griffin 2014, Hargreaves 2000). Sexism involving discrimination against women is often systemic

in sport because this prejudice and poor treatment relative to men underpin the organisation, power structures and dominant cultural ideologies of sport. For instance, sportswomen in general still struggle with parity in recognition, funding, media coverage and sponsorship and women are significantly under-represented in sports leadership, elite coaching and management positions within Australian sport (Burton 2015, Sundstrom, Marchant, and Symons 2011, The Australian Sports Commission 2009). The lesbian label has also been used to limit the power and opportunities of heterosexual women within the sports world (Sartore and Cunningham 2009, Sartore-Baldwin and Cunningham 2010) as well as producing substantial challenges for lesbian sportswomen. Demers (2006) conducted interviews with lesbian coaches and athletes in Canada and found that the team environment was conditionally tolerant for lesbians. Teammates were relatively accepting as long as the visibility of lesbian players was muted in public as this threatened the heterosexual image of the team. This negative environment is mostly silencing (Griffin 1998, Krane and Barber 2003, Sartore and Cunningham 2009, Sartore-Baldwin and Cunningham 2010), can be socially isolating and shame producing (Melton and Cunningham 2012), and can result in poor psychological health (Sartore-Baldwin and Cunningham 2010).

Griffin (1998) was one of the first to identify the various ways that lesbian athletes experience explicit homophobia. These include verbal and physical harassment, insulting or degrading comments, name calling, gestures, taunts, jokes, offensive graffiti, humiliation, exclusion, ridicule and threats. Brackenridge et al. (2008, 39) summarise the personal impacts of what they refer to as a “negative LGB environment: Frustration, fear and self-censorship, exclusion, ostracism, lower productivity/performance success, burnout and desire to leave, survival/internal focus, the pursuit of formal grievances based on sexual orientation discrimination and fearful about openly relying on personal support networks”.

Most recently Anderson (2011, 2015) has observed a loosening of strict hegemonic masculinity and a lessening of homophobia in the male sports world, along with the growing social acceptance of homosexuality within (mainly white) younger generations of sportsmen in the UK



and the US. This has also been evidenced by the “coming out” in 2012-2014 of a number of professional sportsmen and their acceptance by fellow players and supporters (such as soccer player Robbie Rogers, basketball player Jason Collins, NFL player Michael Sam and boxer Orlando Cruz). Much of the above research has involved college athletes in the US and UK, where sport is serious business and campaigns such as *You Can Play*, *Athlete Ally*, and *Go! Athletes* have had some impact. However, in Australia, sport participation is enmeshed in Australian culture (Ward 2010) where sport clubs can be a social hub for local communities. As such, sport participation is mostly located in community sports clubs (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012) and motivated by multiple reasons beyond just elite aspirations (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008). The decentralising of sport into community clubs, often run by volunteers, can make the work of campaigns like those in the US more difficult. Thus, the specific sport experiences of LGB Australians warrant investigation.

While some of the above mentioned progress is encouraging, there is still work to be done to improve LGB inclusion in sport. Recent research into the health, wellbeing, schooling and sport experiences of same-sex attracted and gender diverse (SSAGD) youth within Australia (Hillier et al. 2010, Symons et al. 2014), the UK (National Union of Students 2012) and the US (GLSEN 2013) indicates that homophobia is still significant as a source of ongoing stress for these young people, especially in their educational and sport environments. Although, these studies are not peer-reviewed articles, their evidence is strengthened by large samples (mostly in the thousands) which aimed for representativeness by targeting typically hard to reach LGB people (non-metropolitan, rural, culturally diverse and non-LGB community attached) through tactics like broad based social marketing recruitment.

As recently as 2015, the first international (six western English speaking countries, including Australia) study into homophobia in team sport, named *Out on the Fields* (Denison and Kitchen 2015) surveyed the perceptions of SSAGD people (including 25% heterosexuals) in sport. The researchers found an alarmingly high 80% of the more than 9,000 participants reported

experiencing or witnessing homophobia in team sport. Of the Australian youth (under 22 years old; n = 459) in the survey 70% felt youth sport was not safe or welcoming to SSAGD participants. More than 75% of the respondents reported not being completely 'out' in their sport and many cited the fear of bullying, including from coaches and officials, as a reason for staying closeted.

Using the findings from the first comprehensive study of the sport experiences of LGB people in Australia titled *Come Out to Play* (Symons et al. 2010), the current paper provides a unique psychosocial understanding of the environmental stressors, and impacts of the main discriminatory experiences of LGB people in community and school based sport. In other words, an exploration of the distal and proximal stressors in Meyer's (2003) minority stress model as applied to the sport context. An exploratory and mainly descriptive account of these stressors and impacts is given based on qualitative and content analysis and a comparative analysis based on gender. Although the data used in the present paper is from 2010, it remains relevant as little research has explored the sport experiences of LGB Australians, with other research predominantly originating from North America and Europe. Additionally, with the prevalence of homophobia reported by LGB and heterosexual Australians by Denison and Kitchen (2015) an exploration of the impact of that homophobia is warranted.

Two questions have guided the research: Firstly, what are the predominate types of stressors experienced by same-sex attracted women and men? Secondly, what are the consequences of these stressors and does this differ between men and women who identify as same-sex attracted?

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Participation in the *Come Out to Play* Study was open to anyone living in the state of Victoria over the age of 18 who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT). Participants were recruited to complete the online survey via multiple recruitment strategies. Recruitment cards with the survey URL were distributed at clinics; and businesses such as clubs, bars, bookshops, cafes and restaurants in areas popular with the LGBT community. An electronic

brochure was emailed through the networks of health promotion agency *Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria*, in addition to queer sports networks and university queer departments. In order to reach more non-community attached LGBT people, the e-brochure was also sent to mainstream sports clubs via various state-wide sports organisations. A web banner was also placed on key LGBT websites, and study promotion was conducted via ads in community papers and several radio interviews including on local LGBT radio station JOY 94.9.

Overall, 361 people completed the *Come Out to Play* online survey. A total of 54 participant's data were excluded from analysis due to not meeting the inclusion criteria, that is, lived outside the state of Victoria ( $n = 42$ ), identified as heterosexual ( $n = 8$ ), were under 18 years of age ( $n = 3$ ), and repeated the survey ( $n = 1$ ). The current paper also excluded data from transgender participants due to the more unique themes and sport related issues they reported ( $n = 13$ ). This left a total of 294 completed questionnaires. Of the 294 participants, 52% ( $n = 153$ ) were male and 48% ( $n = 141$ ) were female.

The majority of the sample (85.4%,  $n = 251$ ) reported a homosexual identity. A further 3.7% ( $n = 11$ ) identified as bisexual, 4.1% ( $n = 11$ ) and queer, 1.7% ( $n = 5$ ), while 5.4% ( $n = 16$ ) were unsure about their identity (they were non-heterosexual but did not use a label). The commonality of the sample used in this paper is that they are all same-sex attracted and do not identify as heterosexual. The mean age of participants was 35.69 years ( $\pm 11.45$  years) with a minimum age of 18 and a maximum of 71 years old. It is important to note that this was a sporty sample with many still participating in competitive organised sport in their mid-thirties and older ages – 91.2% of all participants reported still being involved with sport. Thus, while some data is retrospective, most is not. Due to this being the first study to explore the sport experiences of LGB people in Australia, it was deemed that all stories and reflections irrespective of age were valid.

### **Survey**

An online survey was created for the *Come Out to Play* study that included both quantitative and qualitative items and was hosted by survey technology company Demographix. The current

paper concentrates on the four questions in this survey pertaining to discriminatory experiences. Participants were asked questions under four discrimination categories; 1) homophobia, 2) homophobic assault, 3) sexism and 4) other discrimination. Under each discrimination category, they were asked if they had experienced that type of discrimination and how often. Respondents could select 'No', 'Yes-Once', 'Yes-Often', and 'Yes-Always'. Following this was an invitation to provide an example of this discrimination (e.g. Have you ever experienced verbal homophobia in a sport you were involved in? What happened?). They were then asked what impact that discriminatory situation had on them. Participants were also asked if they could provide a second example of discrimination, plus the impact of that discrimination. It eventuated that homophobia and sexism were found in responses across all discrimination categories and as such resulted in some participants offering more than two examples of either homophobia or sexism. Participants responded to these questions using open write-in style boxes with unlimited space. However, it is worth noting that although written-in survey responses varied in length, many responses were quite brief. Ethical approval for the study was provided by the Victoria University Ethics Committee.

## *Analysis*

### *Qualitative*

In order to categorise discrimination experiences and discrimination impact, all the qualitative data needed to be coded via thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). One researcher coded all data provided by participants to these items and then drew like codes together into higher order themes. A second researcher checked all the codes and themes and any code discrepancies between the authors were discussed and a final code agreed upon. Every item response could be allocated up to two codes to describe its thematic content.

*Theoretical thematic analysis*, as described in Braun and Clarke (2006), was the framework used to elicit the themes from the data. This meant that theory determined the types of themes that were looked for in the qualitative data. Braun and Clarke's framework suggests a series of decisions be made about the nature of analysis to be applied to qualitative data. The decisions made about the

analysis conducted in the present study are as follows. The type of coding used was *latent coding*, which goes beyond the semantic meaning of the data and looks for the underlying ideas, assumptions, conceptualisations and ideologies which inform the surface meaning of the data. The type of knowledge sought from the analysis was *constructionist*, meaning that the influence of social structures was identified when attempting to explain the participant's stories.

With regards to discrimination in sport settings, the themes of homophobia and sexism that so strongly feature in the literature on the LGB experience in sport were specifically targeted in the participant's stories. We used the definitions of sexism and homophobia as given in the introduction to guide the thematic coding. When asking participants about discriminatory experiences, homophobia, sexism and other forms of discrimination were asked about but not specifically defined in the survey question in order to give participants some freedom to interpret what they felt was meant by these stressors. Due to this openness, a variety of experiences with these forms of discrimination were described and data across all four discrimination categories were coded for both homophobia and sexism.

The impact of discrimination was investigated by the question "what impact did it have on you?" (the sexist and/or homophobic event). The authors chose to be open to what themes may arise from the participant's stories. However, the Minority Stress Model (Meyer 2003) as applied to the gay, lesbian and bisexual community, was used as a guide in analysing impacts of homophobic and sexist experiences.

### *Rigor and Content Analysis*

Coding began with one researcher who coded all participant responses to the survey questions of interest and then drew like codes together into higher order themes. Analysis rigor was aided by analyst triangulation (Patton 1999) where a second researcher checked all the codes and themes and any code discrepancies between the authors were discussed and a final code (or codes) agreed upon. Additionally, a very small number of written responses deemed spurious were removed from analysis. An element of content analysis (Krippendorff 2012) was utilised to

determine the relative frequencies (and percentages) of code mentions to overall code mentions. Code mentions were then ranked by percentage mentions to determine prominence of themes. Participants could provide none, one or multiple examples of discrimination. As such, frequencies (and percentages) calculated of each theme represent the number of times a theme was mentioned *not how many people mentioned it*.

## **Results**

Overall, survey respondents cited a variety of roles in relation to their sport involvement; however the majority indicated they were sport participants (competitors, players etc.). For those who reported incidences of sexism, 79.2% were participants, 6.2% were officials, 5.4% were administrators, 3.8% were parents and 3.8% were supporters. When it came to people who reported homophobic experiences, 86.7% were participants, 4.6% were officials, 3.7% were supporters, and 3.2% were administrators. This shows that while the majority of people who experience discrimination are sport participants, people in other sporting roles can also be affected by homophobia and/or sexism.

The sport environment most commonly cited as the location of participant's examples of discrimination was organised sport. For examples of sexism, 50.4% were in organised sport, 15.2% were in high school sport, 10.4% were in a gym or leisure environment and 8.0% were in primary school sport. When looking at the examples of homophobia, 66.8% were in organised sport, 20.7% were in high school sport, 5.5% were in a gym or leisure setting and 3.2% were in primary school.

### ***Homophobia, Sexism and Gender***

The first aim of this study was to examine whether same-sex attracted women and same-sex attracted men differ on the frequency of their reports of homophobia and sexism. In the process of analysing the homophobia and sexism in participant's stories two distinct varieties of homophobia and sexism emerged.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

When asked if participants had experienced sexism at some time during their sporting involvement, 42.7% reported that they had. Of those, 18.6% indicated it occurred ‘once’, 72.9% ‘often’ and 8.5% ‘always’. Participants who had experienced sexism during their sporting pursuits were invited to provide examples of such experiences. Table 1 represents the occurrences of the different sexism and homophobia themes in the recollected situations participants chose to share. This is not the number of people who mentioned a theme, but the number of times a theme was drawn out of the stories participants wrote about. Participants discussed examples of sexism that were either systemic or directly and personally experienced. Table 1 shows that for both women and men there was an even distribution of direct and systemic sexism mentions, suggesting neither type of sexism was more pervasive amongst those that mentioned experiences of sexism.

Systemic sexism was seen to be part of the social and formal systems that govern a sporting environment. Women participants produced many more examples of systemic sexism (81%) than men (19%). Men’s examples of systemic sexism were observations of structures that impacted the sporting experiences of women. Examples of this includes women being discouraged from participating in a particular sport due to gender, or women’s sport participation and organisations being given lower priority and less resources. The example below speaks of the discrimination in schedules of play.

*“Structural sexism in that men have reserved time slots e.g. Saturday, while women are supposed to play (golf) during the week. It discriminates against women but particularly against working women”* Lesbian Woman, 55 years old, golf player

Systemic sexism was also reported as a type of formal discrimination such as women only being permitted to coach or officiate for certain sports/teams. The following quote describes the glass ceiling for women in refereeing.

*“Female referees were deemed qualified to only referee women’s finals at national level and a female would never be awarded the No.1 referee position”* Gay Woman, 47 years old, elite level sport official

There were a comparatively similar number of overall examples of direct sexism provided by participants (n = 65) as compared to systemic sexism (n = 63) (See table 1). Again, women (80%) provided many more disclosures of direct sexism experiences when compared to men (20%). A third of the examples of direct sexism given by men were also based on the observations they made of women's experiences rather than their own. Direct sexism was described as having experienced sexist treatment or behaviour directly such as sexist remarks or behaviour and the sexualisation of women sports participants. The following quote reveals that those in sport leadership were also involved in sexist behaviour.

*"My sensi (sic) made inappropriate sexual comments about me and some of the other girls"* Gay Woman, 23 years old, martial arts

Mentions of direct sexism also included examples of women being taken less seriously in sport. The following example describes the attitudinal and behavioural manifestations of the trivialising of women's participation in a traditionally male team sport.

*"The footy boys didn't respect us women [who] were also there to play in the women's division. They didn't take us seriously. They would mock us during the game and a guy even streaked naked out onto the field while we were playing"* Gay Woman, 22 years old, Australian Rules football player at the Australian University Games

Other types of direct sexism mentioned included questioning a woman's femininity or a man's masculinity. The quote below speaks to the gender policing by peers that can happen in sport.

*"Played netball and they (peer group) told me it was a girls sport"* Gay Man, 33 years old, recalling senior secondary school experience.

Some male participants also mentioned examples of direct sexism they had observed women experiencing as opposed to directly experiencing this discrimination themselves. The following example reports on a sport environment that sexualises and demeans women.



*“Men posting lude(sic) pictures of women around the walls, demeaning women through sexist stories”* No Label Man, aged 41 years old, referring to clubrooms and stated this was an ongoing issue.

Participants were also asked if they had experienced homophobia during their involvement in sport. Overall, 41.5% of participants indicated that they had experienced homophobia at some time while involved in sport. Of those participants, 40.0% reported a ‘once’ off experience, while 57.6% reported it happened ‘often’ and 2.4% said it happened ‘always’. Fewer participants reported high frequency homophobia (60% ‘often’ or ‘always’) when compared to sexism (81.4% ‘often’ or ‘always’). However, there were many more disclosures of homophobia in the examples provided by participants. These were mainly made by the men in the study. When discussing homophobia in sport settings, participants described explicit experiences of direct homophobic treatment and also occurrences of implicit environmental homophobia.

From table 1 it can be seen that men reported roughly double the amount of both explicit and implicit homophobia as compared to women. Additionally, for both men and women, there were roughly three times more mentions of explicit versus implicit homophobia. This may suggest that explicit homophobia is either more prevalent or more recognisable than implicit homophobia and that homophobia is perhaps more a part of the sporting experience of male participants.

In the analysis explicit homophobia was defined as mistreatment based on the actual or perceived sexuality of a participant. Some examples of explicit homophobia drawn from the data include discrimination, equating sporty women with being lesbian and being bad at sport with being a gay man, plus verbal abuse and name calling. In the following, the strong use of homophobic language in the known presence of a gay peer communicates to him that he is not welcome.

*“Was in a social setting that individuals knew I was there, conversation topic came up that “faggots” were the scum of the earth, and that they all should be killed etc etc”*, Gay Man, 19 years old, local football club.

More aggressive forms of explicit homophobia such as bullying, threats and assault were also reported by participants. The man below illustrates how verbal homophobia can preface homophobic violence.

*“Accused of being gay in the change rooms leading to threats of violence”* Gay Man, 55 years old, in secondary school Australian Rules football

Implicit homophobia was seen as homophobic or heterosexist words, behaviours or even policy that suggest that LGB people are not accepted nor welcome in that environment. Implicit homophobia may not be directly targeted at an LGB person, who may or may not be out, but it sends a clear message about the rules and norms of an environment’s culture. This type of homophobia was mentioned a third as often as more explicit homophobia for both men and women (see table 1). It may be that participants found it easier to identify or notice homophobia when it is explicit. Examples from the data include casual homophobic remarks (such as “that’s so gay”) made in general or in the general environment, or an expectation that sport is characteristically stigmatising to LGB people. The woman below provides an example of how homophobic language can be part of a sport environment as opposed to a direct attack.

*“It wasn’t directed at me, but the girls were talking about how disgusting and wrong it is (being a lesbian)”* Lesbian Woman, 24 years old, junior basketball club rooms

Other types of implicit homophobia seek to use stereotypes to profile certain sports (such as cricket, soccer) as lesbian sports. The participant below gives the example of women’s cricket as a sport that experiences the ‘dyke’ label.

*“They just say that all female cricketers are dykes”* Not sure (of sexuality) Woman, 18 years old

### ***Impact of Discrimination***

The second aim of this paper was to examine the ways each discrimination type impacted the men and women who participated in the study. Impacts derived from the data are described below in addition to the frequency with which each was mentioned in response to each discrimination type. To focus on the impact themes that were the most potent for participants, only

the top three ranked themes in terms of number of mentions for each discrimination type are presented (number of mentions generally dropped off steeply after the top three). The percentage of mentions refers to the percentage of all mentioned impacts for each discrimination type. Table 2 presents the frequency of the various impact themes in response to both systemic and direct sexism.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

As seen in table 2, ‘negative emotional impact’ was overall the most commonly reported impact of systemic sexism. This was mainly attributed to its prominence amongst women, resulting in the top spot for systemic sexism. With much smaller numbers however, this impact was third ranked for men. ‘Negative emotional impact’ was defined as experiencing negative feelings as a result of a discriminatory experience. This theme was characterised by either reporting emotional responses such as sadness or anger or affecting ongoing mood such as being depressed, as seen in the quote below.

*“It annoyed me and made me feel worthless”* No Label Woman, 18 years, in response to being excluded by boys in school sport (Systemic Sexism)

When it came to direct sexism, where sexist discrimination was directed at participants personally, ‘negative emotional impact’ was the most commonly mentioned impact. It was most mentioned by both women and men (though men in much less numbers). Both women and men mentioned an emotional impact more frequently in response to direct than systemic sexism. The following provides an example of the array of negative emotions reported in response to direct sexism.

*“Felt small, angry, outraged, sense of unfair”* Gay Woman, 29 years old, in response to experiencing sexist comments from men in the gym (Direct Sexism).

The next most prominent impact of systemic sexism was ‘negative engagement with sport’. It was the second most mentioned impact overall, for women and men (but with much less mentions). ‘Negative engagement with sport’ described how participant’s relationships to sport changed because of the discriminatory event. This theme referred to situations which lead

participants to accept the unchangeable discriminatory status quo in sport, feel negatively toward that sport or sport in general, or even leave the sport. The example below links systemic sexism to being discouraged from sport participation.

*“Didn’t want to do sport, felt pissed off and put down”* Lesbian Woman, 45 years old, in response to the gender limitation placed on school sport (Systemic Sexism)

Negative engagement with sport’ was third overall as a response to direct sexism; third for women and fourth for men. The participant, below, speaks of the chronicity of casual sexism in her sport environment.

*“Casual (though not malicious) sexism is quite common in my sport. I didn’t have much respect for the player who made the comment, so was able to ignore it”* No label Woman, 28 years, in response to sexist comment from opposing player in ultimate Frisbee game (Direct Sexism)

For systemic sexism, the next most mentioned impact was ‘victimised’. It was third overall for women and equal third for men (with a third as many mentions as women). The ‘victimised’ impact theme referred to participant reports of situations where they describe being formally discriminated against or even physically abused. The following participant account describes a variety of ways that formalised sex discrimination can impact sports participation.

*“Absolutely - I didn’t know the first thing about umpiring, but I knew how to play. It made me look incompetent because I didn’t know what I was doing. I felt like onlookers attributed that to my sex. I also felt removed/different from my friends - all of my friends were the boys playing and I just wanted to play with them. It reminded me that I was different from them and that my opportunities were limited because I was female”* Lesbian Woman, 33 years old, in response to gender limitations during school sport (Systemic Sexism)

The second most mentioned impact for females in response to systemic sexism was ‘positive impact’. Participants were deemed to have experienced a positive impact if they mentioned using the situation to motivate themselves to play better or change things for the better in their sporting environment, as seen in the quote below.

*“Made me set out to prove that I could do it, made me want to beat the men more”* Lesbian Woman, 30 years old, in response to sexist comments during mixed gender cycling training (Direct Sexism).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the top impact mentioned by males for systemic sexism was ‘no impact’. Men are much less likely to face policies and structures, such as less access to better facilities or coaches, which discriminate against them based on gender (Henderson 1995). ‘No impact’ meant that the situation reported by participants had no impact on them. Thus a number of men mentioned that systemic sexism, often something they observed in regard to women, had no impact on them personally.

The last impact of note for sexism was ‘relationships’. It was the second most mentioned impact of direct sexism by men. The impact theme of ‘relationships’ referred to how an experience of discrimination affected the relationships participants had with people in their sport involvement. ‘Relationships’ impact included judging or avoiding those who contribute to discrimination in sport, being socially excluded, or empathising with other victims of discrimination, as seen in the following quote.

*“Didn’t fit in with the cool gang at school”* Gay Man, 44 years old, referring social ostracism due to judgment over not being able to kick or throw during school sports

Turning to the impacts of homophobia experienced in sport, table 3 provides the frequencies of all the impact themes mentioned in relation to both explicit and implicit homophobia for both men and women.

[INSERT TABLE 3 HERE]

Much like in response to sexism, ‘negative emotional impact’ was the most prolific impact of homophobia of either type. It was the most mentioned impact overall for both men and women in response to both explicit and implicit homophobia. For women, well over half of their mentioned impacts of explicit homophobia were ‘negative emotional impact’; this was around a third for men. ‘Negative emotional impact’ also accounted for a third of the mentioned impacts of implicit

homophobia for both men and women. The examples below reveal the emotional impact of explicit homophobia on one's emerging sexual identity and implicit homophobia on one's sense of belonging.

*“Hurtful, difficult as it came at a time I was struggling with my sexuality”* Gay Woman, 25 years old, in response to comments during a volleyball game (Explicit Homophobia).

*“Felt more isolated from the team”* Queer Man, 26 years old, in response to team mates general homophobic comments during competition (Implicit Homophobia).

‘Negative engagement with sport’ was the next most prominent impact of explicit homophobia. It was the second most prolific impact for men and equal third for women, with almost a quarter of mentions for men and a tenth of mentions for women. This suggests men may be more put off sport by experiences of explicit homophobia. ‘Negative engagement with sport’ didn’t rank highly in response to implicit homophobia. The quote below reveals how chronic experiences of explicit homophobia in sport can build till escape seems the best recourse.

*“The reoccurrence of such events led me to become increasingly uncomfortable in the club and eventually leave it”* Gay Man, 22 years Old, in response to threatening comments in a social setting at an Australian Rules football club (Explicit Homophobia).

An impact of note in response to homophobia was ‘identity impact’. ‘Identity impact’ either influenced the way participants saw themselves or whether they expressed or acknowledged their sexual identity. This referred to situations that lead participants to feel negative about themselves because of their gender or sexuality, or reinforced that they needed to hide their sexuality. In response to explicit homophobia, it was the second most mentioned impact for women with around an eighth of mentions (although not included in table 3, it was also an eighth of mentions for males (18 mentions) and ranked fourth). This suggests directly targeted homophobia can impact identity related self-worth or reinforce the message you will not be accepted as your authentic self, as seen in the quote below.

*“Hurt, because I thought more people would realise that I was gay but wasn't ready to come out”*

Lesbian Woman, 23 years old, in response to homophobic slurs during school sport (Explicit Homophobia).

‘Identity impact’ was the second most mentioned impact type for both men and women in response to implicit homophobia, accounting for over a fifth of mentioned impacts. The following quote relays how implicit homophobia can reinforce the decision to conceal one’s sexuality.

*“Very big (impact) as I was not yet out to anyone, and it reinforced the message that who I was something to be ashamed of”*, Gay Man, 23 years old, in response to a coach using general homophobic language during a competition.

For men another prominent impact in response to homophobia was ‘positive impact’. It was third most frequently mentioned for men at a fifth of mentions. Much like women’s response to direct sexism, in the face of direct personally targeted explicit homophobia, men looked to turn it into something positive, as seen below.

*“Didn’t distract me at all – made me focus on winning the next point”*, Gay Man, 40 years old, in response to a homophobic slur during a tennis match

For implicit homophobia, ‘no impact’ was the third most mentioned impact for both men (equal third) and women, accounting for about a sixth of impact mentions for each gender (but with relatively low numbers for women). Implicit homophobia at the gym did not affect the man quoted below.

*“None really. I think they are usually just showing off”*, Gay Man, 44 years old, in response to general homophobic language heard around the gym.

Equal third for men in response to implicit homophobia was impact to ‘relationships’. It was cited by a small number of men, accounting for almost a sixth of men’s mentions. The following quote shows how this man’s connection with his team mates was damaged by their casual homophobia.

*“Undermined my sexual confidence and ability to form mutually respectful relationships with team members”* Queer Man, 26 years old, in response to general homophobic jokes from team mates during a competition.

## **Discussion**

The results from this study indicate that LGB people report numerous sexist and homophobic discriminatory events within the various sport environments and these instances of social stress can be chronic and acute in nature and have a variety of psycho-social impacts on the individual. Women in the study reported more direct and systemic sexism than the men, whilst men disclosed more experiences of explicit and implicit homophobic events than the women. Sexism was reported to occur frequently and hence appears to be chronic and embedded in the structures and practices of the sport context. Overall, these reported experiences of sexism revealed a socio-cultural context in which heterosexual men’s sporting abilities, interests and achievements were often privileged over women’s and that women’s sporting participation and achievements were also subject to trivialisation and sexualisation. Furthermore, there were sixteen instances of victimisation and discrimination described by women as limiting their development and opportunities in sport. Sexism was also recalled and interpreted by study participants as a form of gender policing, in which same-sex attracted women and men had their femininity and masculinity called into question because of their presumed non-heterosexual orientation and/or the gendering of the sport they played.

Whilst homophobic events were not experienced as chronically as sexist events, they were more than double the number of sexist incidents reported by the participants in the study, and this was the leading discriminatory stressor reported by same-sex attracted men. Explicit homophobia included verbal abuse, bullying, assault, discriminatory treatment and the “othering” of LGB people within the mainstream sport environment. This mistreatment was directed at specific individuals and groups perceived to be LGB. Implicit homophobia worked more indirectly and pervasively to reinforce the heteronormative rules and norms of the sports environment as well as stigmatise LGB



people and affirm messages that they were less welcomed and accepted. The overall direction of this sexist and homophobic discrimination within sport, that of reproducing traditional gender divisions and the gender order which asserts and reinforces heterosexual male privilege and dominance, the marginalisation of women and the stigmatisation or “othering” of LGB people, is certainly reflected in the sociological, historical and psychological literature on gender, sexuality and sport spanning the 1990s – 2000s (Anderson 2005, Brackenridge et al. 2008, Hargreaves 1994, Melton 2013, Messner 2002, Rowe and McKay 1999, Sartore and Cunningham 2009). This study confirms that homophobia and sexism are significant stressors for LGB people within community sport in contemporary Australia. Furthermore, these are classic cases of minority stress (Meyer 2003) for LGB sports participants in that the social stress is chronic and acute, largely emanates from the socio-cultural structures and discourses of mainstream sport, and hence are distal stressors often out of the control of the individual. These stressors are additional to the general social and competition based stressors experienced by sports participants.

The most prevalent impacts of these discriminatory experiences on LGB people were negative emotions and negative engagement with sport. A negative emotional impact was the most mentioned impact for women and men to both types of sexism and homophobia (with the exception of men and systemic sexism). This suggests that even if discrimination is not personally targeted at LGB people (e.g. implicit homophobia and systemic sexism) it still has an emotional toll on them. Negative feelings such as sadness, anger, defensiveness, distress, feeling uncomfortable and withdrawn, humiliation and shame, and affects such as depression were the most common responses. This suggests that the occurrence of incidental or chronic sexism and/or homophobia in sporting environments can inflict an emotional toll on LGB people who take part in those sporting pursuits. Emotional impacts may be in that moment (angry, humiliated) or can be more pervasive (depression). This result is noteworthy when placed in the context of the increased risk LGB people have for developing poor mental health (Cochran, Sullivan, and Mays 2003, Corboz et al. 2008, Cox et al. 2010, Lewis et al. 2002, Meyer 2003, Meyer, Dietrich, and Schwartz 2008), and the

mental health impact of lesbian stigma on same-sex attracted female athletes (Sartore-Baldwin and Cunningham 2010).

Participants also discussed how their relationships to sport changed as an outcome of these stressors, including feelings of negativity to the specific sport environment that was the source of the stress, dislike of sport in general and for some being driven from the sport altogether. Results suggested that for women, systemic sexism lead to more negative engagement with sport as compared to direct sexism. Hence, sexism inherent in the systems of sport was more off-putting than when it is personally directed at participants. However, the reverse seemed true in response to homophobia. Explicit homophobia resulted in more negative sport engagement than did implicit homophobia, indicating that participants may have found ways to remain in sport as long as homophobia stayed implied. Some of the men in the study described how the sexism of their fellow heterosexual male club members towards women in the club also negatively affected their relationships with these men, resulting in distancing and avoidance rather than friendship and engagement.

Considering the strong evidence supporting the physical (Physical Activity Guidelines Advisory Committee 2008, Morris, Waldo, and Rothblum 2001, Paffenbarger Jr et al. 1986) and mental health benefits (Eime et al. 2013) of regular physical activity, of which sport is a vital component, these negative emotional and engagement impacts of minority stress in sport for LGB people is of concern. Eime et al. (2013, 9) systematic review of the literature on the psychological and social health of sport participation emphasised that sports club involvement may be more beneficial for social health outcomes than individually based physical activity because of the “enhanced social connectedness, social support, peer bonding and self-esteem” provided within a sports club. Such social benefits are harder to attain in sports clubs and environments in which sexism, heterosexism and homophobia produce the negative emotional and social impacts found in this study. In fact, peer bonding and social connectedness may be achieved in these mainstream sport settings through discourses and practices that affirm heteronormative ideals of gender and

sexuality. Through education and raising awareness about the experiences of LGB people in sport these widespread and somewhat naturalised binary ideals can be questioned and opened up to more complex and diverse understandings of gender and sexuality, promoting social connection that values diversity and inclusion within the sport environment.

In response to homophobia, the next most prominent impact in the sporting arena for our sample was impact on one's sense or expression of identity. Homophobia, disclosed by women in our sample, but more so by men, contributes to diminished self-identity in several ways. While sending the message that you are not 'OK' or are 'less than', it additionally feeds internalised homophobia (Meyer 2003) and reinforces the notion that LGB people are not welcome in sport and should therefore hide their sexuality if they wish to participate. This is reflected in the Minority Stress Model (Meyer 2003) which describes proximal *Minority Stress Processes* that include expectations of rejection, concealment of LGB identity and internalised homophobia. Myer suggests these proximal subjective processes are the internalised impact of someone appraising an environment or stressful event as hostile to their sexual minority identity. 'Identity impact' was more prominently mentioned in response to implicit homophobia, perhaps indicating that homophobia was seen to be an accepted part of the sporting culture or environment, even if not personally directed or intentional. Again, exclusion is at work here. The most frequently mentioned impacts in this study match some of the personal impacts of 'LGB negative' sport environments identified by Brackenridge and colleagues (2008). These include frustration and fear (negative emotional impact), burnout and desire to leave (negative engagement with sport), and self-censorship (identity impact).

Interestingly, when direct homophobia was experienced by men in this study (direct sexism was experienced by women – but fourth ranked), a reasonable proportion described positive impacts which involved them using the situation to motivate better sporting performances or spurred them on to change their sports environment for the better. It appears that when the discrimination/abuse is directed at the individual, it may be experienced more as a direct threat which compels the person to

defend themselves and/or respond with positive re-framing and actions. In contrast, there were far less positive impact responses described by women experiencing systemic sexism and implicit homophobia and men experiencing implicit homophobia. When discrimination and abuse is embedded at the organisational level and ‘taken for granted’ the culture of the sport is more difficult to challenge individually. This is especially so for a minority who are rendered largely invisible and lack solidarity due to the effects of heterosexism, stigma and shame. Safety through the ‘closet’ is often a necessity, but can also work against direct action for positive change. The inter-related effects of systemic sexism and implicit homophobia on same-sex attracted women in sport also produce formidable barriers for positive re-framing and intervention (Griffin 2014).

### ***Conclusion***

Results from the current paper suggest that sexism and homophobia are still potent influences on the sporting experiences of LGB people. These forms of discrimination can contribute to a negative relationship with sport and even result in individuals leaving or never engaging in sporting pursuits, thus being denied the many health and social benefits that sport and exercise participation provide. Discrimination that is embedded in the culture and social structure of sport environments, such as systemic sexism and implicit homophobia, impact LGB people emotionally and can disempower individuals or groups from directly challenging the heteronormative status quo. When discrimination is targeted directly at LGB sport participants, their self-concept can be negatively impacted, however this can also energise recipients to challenge discrimination or use it to motivate performance.

LGB social inclusion strategies in sport should combat discriminatory language and abuse, and be based on a new paradigm of connectedness based on embracing sexuality and gender equality, diversity and respect. Whilst more challenging to address, structural inequality in sport that maintains heterosexual male privilege and underpins the disempowering of and discriminating against women and gay men, also needs to be acknowledged and gradually transformed for this equality and respect for diversity to be enabled and sustained. Since the *Come Out to Play* survey

was conducted, broad social change involving an increased acceptance of LGB people within mainstream social institutions of many western countries has occurred and the climate in sport has also become more open to LGB social inclusion strategies. In fact, the *Come Out to Play* research provided a catalyst for the first government funded community development oriented program to promote sexual and gender diversity in Australian sport, titled *Fair go, sport!* ([www.humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au/fair-go-sport-home](http://www.humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au/fair-go-sport-home)). This strategy was piloted in field hockey at the national, state and local club level and involved strong leadership that championed inclusion and respect of LGBT peoples in the sport, the implementation of diversity inclusion policies and practices, education and awareness raising, and the staging of high profile and celebratory events that raised the visibility of and engaged hockey participants in LGBT inclusion. The *Fair go, sport!* approach to sexuality and gender diversity inclusion has also been effectively used in the secondary school sports setting within Victoria. Recognising the intertwining nature and emotional impact of sexism, homophobia and heterosexism on LGB sports people is a vital part of the journey to diversity and respect in sporting structures and environments. Furthermore, Cunningham has demonstrated the positive and productive impacts of LGBT inclusion on the organisational performance of university athletics departments within the USA that have a high sexual orientation diversity commitment and a strong proactive diversity strategy (2011).

A limitation of the present study was the lack of unique analysis of the experiences of bisexual participants as a separate group. This should be addressed by future research in addition to the impact of sport-based discrimination on gender and sex diverse participants. Future studies should also seek to employ a deeper exploration of the emotional, identity and sport engagement impacts of discrimination on LGB sport participants beyond the survey methodology utilised in the present study. It would also be beneficial to compare the experiences of LGB sports people who are out or not out to their peers. Further, some stories were more retrospective and while important to acknowledge, future research should seek to focus on current experiences of LGB sport involvement in order to make stronger conclusions about the current state of homophobia in sport.

Finally, the sporty sample would suggest a self-selection bias, this means that sporty LGB people could be overrepresented in the data and LGB people who have been put off sport were underrepresented.

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Table 1: Frequency of Different Sexism and Homophobia Themes Drawn from Discriminatory Events Reported by Women and Men

Stressor	Women	Men	Total
Systemic Sexism	51 (81.0%)	12 (19.0%)	63
Direct Sexism	52 (80%)	13 (20%)	65
Explicit Homophobia	57 (35.6%)	103 (64.4%)	160
Implicit Homophobia	22 (38.6%)	35 (61.4%)	57

Table 2: The Top Three Impacts of Sexism for Each Sexism Type for Women and Men (number of mentions and percent of total mentions)

Women's Top 3 Impacts	Women	Men	Men's Top 3 Impacts
Systemic Sexism			
Negative Emotional Impact	33 (39.3%)	6 (35.3%)	No Impact
Negative Engagement with sport	16 (19.0%)	4 (23.5%)	Negative Engagement with sport
Victimised	15 (17.9%)	3 (17.6%)	Victimised / Negative Emotional Impact
Direct Sexism			
Negative Emotional Impact	43 (64.2%)	10 (37.0%)	Negative Emotional Impact
Positive Impact	12 (17.9%)	7 (25.9%)	Relationships
Negative Engagement with sport	5 (7.5%)	5 (18.5%)	Negative Engagement with sport

Table 3: The Top Three Impacts of Homophobia for Each Homophobia Type for Women and Men  
(number of mentions and percent of total mentions)

Women's Top 3 Impacts	Women	Men	Men's Top 3 Impacts
<b>Explicit Homophobia</b>			
Negative Emotional Impact	40 (57.1%)	43 (30.3%)	Negative Emotional Impact
Identity impact	8 (11.4%)	34 (23.9%)	Negative Engagement with sport
Negative Engagement with sport/No Impact	7 (10.0%)	26 (18.3%)	Positive Impact
<b>Implicit Homophobia</b>			
Negative Emotional Impact	10 (37.0%)	17 (34.7%)	Negative Emotional Impact
Identity impact	6 (22.2%)	10 (20.4%)	Identity impact
No Impact	4 (14.8%)	7 (14.3%)	No Impact/Relationships