

THE VIEW FROM THE BENCH: COACHES' PERCEPTIONS OF  
HOMONEGATIVITY IN HIGH SCHOOL GIRLS' SPORTS

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

In

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Educational Studies)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

November 2005

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines how and why homonegativity is manifested in girls' and women's organized, school-based sports. It questions the relationship between the social construction of gender, lesbian and non-heterosexual identity, and the regulation of girls in sports through traditional understandings of gender and sexuality. Of specific interest in this investigation, are the high school coaches of female athletes, their understanding and interpretation of these concepts, and how their beliefs are manifested in their coaching practice.

Interviews were conducted with 5 coaches who teach and coach in high schools in the Vancouver School District. The stories of the participants weave a textured account of the relationship between sport, female athletes, coaching and the education system. Their discussions revealed the complexity of the relationship between coach and athlete, how homonegativity is interpreted and challenged in the broader education system, and the position and functioning of school athletics within that system. In addition, the coach's level of awareness and knowledge surrounding issues of oppression and discrimination, along with their personal experience as an athlete, teacher and coach, all contributed to, and informed their coaching practice.

While some of the coaches in this study acknowledged or recognized gendered, sexist, heterosexist and homonegative attitudes and behaviors among the students, athletes and teachers in their schools, a number of them did not. It became apparent that homonegativity remains a deeply entrenched systemic problem in the school system. This was further evidenced by the fact that many of the study

participants did not possess the knowledge, skills or language necessary to articulate, deconstruct and unveil homonegative behavior as systemic discrimination of non-heterosexuals. As a result subtle and subversive forms of homonegativity went unchallenged and uninterrupted. Those who were making efforts to educate students and athletes regarding homonegativity in sport were functioning in isolation, and had little support or resources to call on to unravel and combat sexual orientation bias.

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## **Acknowledgments**

I have been blessed with much support and encouragement throughout the research and writing of this thesis. These gifts came in many forms, and from several people.

First, I would like to thank my thesis committee (who became my co-advisors), for the critical exchange they have offered me. Their time and effort to challenge me in my work is greatly appreciated. To my initial advisor, Dr. Allison Tom who provided intellectual challenge, sound judgment, helpful tips, and whose unwavering patience saw me through many trials and tribulations in my process, I send heartfelt appreciation. I am grateful to Dr. Michelle Stack for being the external reader for this thesis.

I would also like to thank my study participants for sharing their thoughts, stories and perceptions regarding homonegativity in their coaching and teaching practice. I appreciate the time and energy they devoted to this project. I have learned a lot from our conversations and continue to do so.

I would also like to thank my three beautiful children, Noah, Benjamin and Camryn, who were a constant reminder to me to stay grounded in my work. They also served as tremendous motivation to develop solutions where I found problems, to ensure they will learn and play in a school environment that values them for who they are.

Lastly, I want to thank my partner Caroline Brunt, whose endless support, love and encouragement got me through many difficult times and who always believed in me when I found it difficult to believe in myself.

## Chapter One

### Perceptions and Actions: Gender and Sexuality in Sport

This thesis relies on a variety of theories to question, explicate and understand how and why homonegativity is manifested in girls and women's organized, school-based sports. To understand this phenomenon, I question the relationship between the social construction of gender, lesbian and non-heterosexual identity, and the regulation of girls in sports through traditional understandings of (or attitudes towards) gender and sexuality. I argue that these complex and complicated relationships contribute to manifestations of homonegativity in sport, and should be of concern and relevance to all girls and women, regardless of their sexual orientation. Of specific interest in this investigation, are the *coaches* of female athletes, their understanding and interpretation of these concepts, and how their beliefs are manifested in their coaching practice. The central question I explore in this study is: what are the strategies high school coaches employ to provide an inclusive and safe environment for high school female athletic participation, with special attention to those female athletes who do not self-identify as heterosexual?

Utilizing feminist theories of gender, identity, and regulation of the body, I explicate the complex relationship between these concepts. This theoretical orientation has guided me as I developed my research questions, planned the study, conducted interviews and analyzed the interview data. It shaped both the questions I asked and the conclusions, I have come to.



In this chapter, I outline the related, and interconnected theories that informed my questioning and analysis, highlighting the tensions between them and the places where they complement one another. I also discuss the terminology used in the study, including reasons for the choices made. Next, I outline my positionality and personal interest in this research, why the research is relevant and significant, and how it fills an important gap in the existing knowledge on homonegativity in girls and women's sport. I finish with a brief description of the nature of the data collected, how I interpret it, and an outline of the chapters to follow.

### **Theoretical framework**

My analysis of homonegativity in girls' and women's sporting experiences is shaped by feminist theories of gender, the body, lesbian and non-heterosexual 'identity' and representations of homonegativity in the broader social structure. The feminist theories I focus on are those that reveal gender as a social construction, independent from sex. Homonegativity refers to *purposeful*, rather than *irrational* negative attitudes and behaviors towards non-heterosexuals. This term, and my use of it, will be discussed further in the terminology section of this chapter. I explore the relationships between gender and sexuality, as they relate to females in sport, with the purpose of illuminating how high school girls' athletic coaches understand the association between these concepts. I consider the concept of gender, engaging with feminist thought, and attempt to expose the tensions that exist around our understanding of gender. I will discuss how notions

of sexuality slip into, and merge with, theories of gender and the subversive power of heteronormativity as expressed through compulsory heterosexuality.

*The construction of gender, sexual orientation and the heterosexual matrix*

Gender is a major social and theoretical category, just as significant as the more familiar sociological categories of class and race (Hall, 1988). While gender is not constant or uniform, but rather a shifting and unstable concept, it nonetheless exists as a social and institutional 'construction', one which positions males as superior and privileged and females as inferior and subordinate (Butler, 1990; Kitzinger, 1987). The categorization of male/female, feminine/masculine 'essentializes' the construction of gender in North American society (Butler, 1990). There is also a problematic tendency in North America, to translate 'gender' to mean 'woman'. As M. Ann Hall (1988) articulates: "women's experiences are seen as variations (or deviations) on men's; we know women only in relation to men" (p. 331). The groundbreaking research (Butler, 1990, 1993; Sedgwick, 1990) in the last two decades that revealed gender as socially constructed and assembled in a manner that privileges males and subordinates and oppresses females, is foundational to the investigation of homonegativity in female athletics.

Of particular relevance to the current study is the feminist deconstruction of gender by Judith Butler. Butler's aim is to provoke 'gender trouble' in the mind of the reader, denaturalize the categories of gender, and reveal it as a performance on and of the body. She contends that we 'perform' gender, that is,

our gender is not reflective of some authentic core, but is a fabrication, a performance, the affects of which we learn to mimic (Butler, 1990). Butler's work offers significant salience to the current study. To some extent, however, I question Butler's theorizing as awarding an inordinate amount of power and influence to societal definitions and assignments of gender. She grants little authority to the individual in choosing their identity construction and rather refers to individuals as simply 'mimics'. She also does not question how individuals perceive and interpret their socially assigned gender performance, and how that interpretation might differ from person to person.

While viewing gender as a social and cultural construction, Butler challenges the anchoring of gender on the sexed body. She argues that gender is assigned and regulated from birth. She suggests: "and in that naming, the girl is "girled," brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender" (Butler, 1993, p. 7). Once assigned, gender is regulated by various authorities through the setting of a boundary and reification of that norm (Butler, 1993). The norms are policed and reinforced through social functions and institutions; thus, the performing of gender is not elective. Regardless of their personal comfort with it, many people comply with their gender assignment (in varying degrees) to avoid ostracism, punishment and possibly violence from those who police gender.

Butler (1993) identifies 'femininity' as the significant interpellation of 'girl', but points to its performative nature. She describes this practice: "girling....governs the formation of a corporeally enacted femininity that never

approximates the norm” (p. 232). Femininity or any manifestation of gender behavior is a copy of a copy and in fact, no authentic and naturalized ‘norm’ exists. The theorizing of gender as a performance, without any authentic base, disrupts the gendered construction of many social institutions. As one of those social institutions, sport relies on a merging of sex and gender, conflating maleness with masculinity and femaleness with femininity. This categorical structure awards significant power and influence to males/masculinity and denigrates females/femininity. In doing so, those who control sport profess this division as natural, normal and unquestionable.

In her related work on sexuality, Eve Sedgwick (1990) concurs with Butler on the dangers of conflating and merging concepts of gender, sex, and sexuality and states that the charting of space between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ has been one of the most successful undertakings of feminist thought. Feminist resistance to the merging of sex and gender and the subsequent social privileges and constraints afforded to males and females, has contributed to a significant disruption of the gender order in sport. Most specifically, it has called into question the historical domination of males and the deprecation of females in sport as natural and justifiable.

Related to her work on deconstructing gender is Butler’s (1990) critique of the concepts of identity, in relation to the performative nature of gender, and the binary system it functions within. This analysis is integral to her argument regarding the binary relationship of gender, sexuality and other categories of

identity distinction. Here, she discusses the concept of identity and the decontextualization of that category:

The masculine/feminine binary constitutes not only the exclusive framework in which that specificity can be recognized, but in every other way the "specificity" of the feminine is once again fully decontextualized and separated off analytically and politically from the constitution of class, race, ethnicity, and other axes of power relations that both constitute "identity" and make the singular notion of identity a misnomer. (Butler, 1990, p. 7).

Butler reminds us that an attempt to 'separate' and 'splinter' identity (separating gender from race, ethnicity, class, ability, socio-economic status) is impossible and denies the many layered and multi-textured nature of gender.

Interconnecting with race, class, and ethnicity, gender forms a complex and contextualized identity that cannot be essentialized. In order, however, to keep within a reasonable scope, Butler's treatment of concepts of a feminine/masculine binary and the intersecting binary of homosexuality/heterosexuality in the cultural construction of North American sport practices are the most salient for my study. Specifically Butler describes the relationship between gender and sexuality as a "heterosexual matrix". She states:

that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized...[it] characterizes a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality. (Butler, 1990, p. 194).

Butler critiques the narrowing, decontextualizing and binary categorization of gender as a limiting concept, and one that privileges heterosexuality. Butler

(1991) also contends that sexuality cannot be read off gender performance, and no causal lines can be drawn between sex, gender, gender presentation, sexual practice and sexuality. This places the heterosexual matrix, and the assigned privilege of it, on an unstable and indeterminable base. This mythical base is founded on the cultural belief that sexuality and sexual orientation are indisputably inscribed on the body, and can be read and defined through an individual's appearance, interests, behaviors, attitudes or other personal manifestations.

Fortifying Butler's arguments regarding the construction of gender and other aspects of identity, Sedgwick (1990) questions the categorizing of sexuality, and specifically, the way in which we are assigned our sexual orientation. Sedgwick is intrigued by the fact that:

of the very many dimensions along which the genital activity of one person can be differentiated from that of another....precisely one, the gender of object choice, emerged....and has remained, as *the* dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of 'sexual orientation' (p. 8, emphasis in original).

Based on this definition, the forms of choice became defined solely as symmetrical binary oppositions known as heterosexual/homosexual. Sedgwick (1990) further determines that, in reality, the categories of sexual orientation are not symmetrical or equal, but rather homosexuality is subordinated to heterosexuality, and, in fact, heterosexuality depends for its meaning on the "simultaneous subsumption and exclusion" of homosexuality (p. 10). This argument draws a profoundly connected, and mutually dependent, relationship between the culturally constructed binary opposition of heterosexuality and

homosexuality. Illustrating this connected relationship, Butler (1991) describes the concept and prevalence of heteronormativity as the act of heterosexuality elaborating itself as evidence of its own dominance, due to its fear of the risk of losing that dominant social position. As it can never eradicate that risk, it is profoundly dependent upon the homosexuality that it seeks to eliminate or make secondary to itself (Butler, 1991). I contend that this argument forms the underlying basis of heteronormative and homonegative social behaviors and attitudes. Sedgwick (1990) concurs with this argument and suggests that the categories of sexual orientation while unstable, are not ineffective or harmless. She reminds us that the creation of homo/heterosexual definition did not take place in a setting of emotional space and neutrality, but rather in an environment of homophobic intent to devalue one form of sexual object choice over the other. This has led to a long history of sexuality regulating who is in and who is out.

Concurring with Butler (1990, 1993) and Sedgwick (1990) Susan Bordo (1993) investigates feminist politics of the body through the analysis of discourses and conceptions of gender, the female body, and the reproduction of femininity. She further explores the political implications of postmodern thought on conceptions of the body, femininity and sexuality. Bordo (1993) discusses the application of gender performance to socially constructed categories of sexuality: "That illusion [of an interior and authentic gender core]....effectively protects the institution of reproductive heterosexuality from scrutiny and critique as an institution, continually regulating rather than merely reflecting our sexuality" (p. 290, emphasis in original). The protection of heterosexuality and the binary

regulation of femininity/masculinity are foundations of the sport system, serving to justify male, heterosexual privilege. This hegemonic belief serves to reify the 'regulation of sexuality' as Bordo describes it. Thus, as Griffin (1998) states, "as an institution, sport serves important social functions in supporting conventional social values" (p. 16).

Butler (1990, 1991, 1993), Bordo (1993), and Sedgwick's (1990) theorizing of the reproductive and imitative nature of both gender and heterosexuality as social constructions, and their reifying and regulating practices, can be applied to the study of girls and women in sport. If gender is 'performed' as Butler describes it, so are each of the constructions of femininity and masculinity and their reproductions in cultural institutions such as work, home, school, and sports. The premise that gender is socially constructed, as opposed to a 'core identity', renders null and void the common and discriminatory argument that sport (or some sports), are innately gender specific, and therefore, 'naturally appropriate' for one gender over the other. Their arguments do, however, explain how gender and sexuality as deeply entrenched and powerful concepts are used to regulate, and control female participation and reify and justify male heterosexual dominance of sport.

### *The construction of lesbian identity*

Eve Sedgwick (1990) speaks to the dangers of essentializing experience. She contends that, though we are socially categorized by the core concepts of race, gender, class, nationality, and sexual orientation, people differ from each



other in considerable and profound ways. This argument challenges the limited and constraining notion of sexual identity, and acknowledges the complexity of people's lives, modes of affiliation, and identity formation. It also raises the contentious issue of the benefits and dangers of determining identity either through individual or cultural definition, and the political reasons for doing so. In considering this challenge, Butler (1991) states: "identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression" (p. 13-14). Admitting that in certain situations she will appear under the sign of 'lesbian' for specific political purposes, Butler (1991) would prefer that it was permanently unclear what precisely that sign signifies. She (1991) also suggests that applying a specificity to lesbian identity has seemed a necessary counterpoint to the claim that lesbian sexuality is just heterosexuality once removed, or a derivative of it, or that it does not exist. There has been much opposition to this claim and significant theorizing around how it is that 'lesbianism' should be identified and interpreted through a feminist lens.

This contention underlies the work of Celia Kitzinger (1987). Kitzinger argues that the emergence of the liberal humanist approach to lesbianism, which became popular in the 1970's in opposition to the pathological model of lesbianism, simply substituted one depoliticized construction of the lesbian with another. In doing so, it continued to undermine systematically radical feminist theories of lesbianism. Kitzinger (1987) states: "the *radical* feminist argument is based on the belief that the institution of compulsory heterosexuality is

fundamental to the patriarchal oppression of women: lesbianism then, represents women's refusal to collaborate in our own betrayal" (p. vii, emphasis in original). Kitzinger (1987) suggests that liberal humanist ideology, specifically when supporting lesbianism, prevents women from recognizing male power and identifying our oppression.

In contrast to the diametrically opposing argument of liberal humanist, versus radical feminist models of lesbian identity, Sykes (1996) investigates the challenge of not essentializing lesbian identity from a 'queered' but 'socially situated' perspective. Taking into account the deconstruction of gender by Butler (1990, 1993), she investigates the viewpoint of 'sexuality as performance', while also focusing on the contrasting institutional viewpoints and discourses that 'constrict and construct lesbian identities'. She reconciles the two perspectives in this way:

To my mind, the poststructural notion that sexual identities are effects performed at the surface of the body allows for the "as if lesbians existed" assumption while emphasizing the ongoing construction—and therefore allowing the deconstruction—of lesbianism as marginal, and heterosexuality as normative sexualities. (p. 467)

Sykes recognizes the value of a queer perspective as one that acknowledges the fluidity of a 'lesbian' identity (or any sexual identity) and the importance of dispelling the myth of a stable and constant notion of sexual identity. At the same time, she acknowledges that institutional discourses exist that identify the lesbian/non-heterosexual (as if they existed) in such a way as to discriminate, denigrate and dishonor them.

This epistemological framework is particularly relevant to situate the current study, as my research is centred within the institutions that Sykes refers to, in this case, education and sport. In order to disrupt and dismantle discriminatory discourse, we must first recognize and acknowledge that an essentialized identity as non-heterosexual (ie. lesbian) exists in the everyday culture, policies, and attitudes of institutionalized discourses. That is, institutional discourses assume a heterosexual subject, thus in an oppositional sense, a queer or non-heterosexual subject is implicated (exists) by their absence or invisibility (Sedgwick, 1990).

Further, as Sykes contends, sexuality is seen as a binary (homo/hetero) with lesbian identity marginalized, and heterosexuality viewed as normative and 'natural'. It is important to note, however, that in an effort to reduce and eliminate discrimination of those who identify as non-heterosexual, we must be cautious not to conceptualize 'non-heterosexuality' as a group, which would reify a stable and constant notion of sexual identity (binary of hetero/homo), even as we work to dismantle it. Presenting and encouraging the adoption of a queer perspective of sexual identity as fluid will serve to problematize the current institutionalized, narrow and restrictive view of sexual identity. While broadening the perspective of sexual identity, it is also imperative that the deconstructing of a binary encompasses the de-centering of heterosexuality, or any sexuality, and emphasizes the respecting and valuing of a full range of sexual identities.

### *The universalizing and minoritizing of sexuality*

Of final relevance to the current study is Sedgwick's (1990) conceptualizing of a contradiction active in the understandings of homo/heterosexual definition, by both those who are heterosexist and those who are anti-homophobic. Sedgwick (1990) describes this contradiction as the notion of:

seeing homo/heterosexual definition on the one hand as an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority (what I refer to as a minoritizing view), and seeing it on the other hand as an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities (what I refer to as a universalizing view) (p. 1).

While Sedgwick does not attempt to adjudicate between these two poles, I contend that the minoritizing view serves to position discrimination based on sexual orientation as of little or no relevance to the heterosexual majority, and as primarily a problem of non-heterosexuals, and theirs alone to contend with. In contrast, the universalizing perspective acknowledges that systemic and socially constructed and justified attitudes of hatred and discrimination based on difference serve very few in society and in fact, should be of concern to all. This practice perpetuates the attitude that value is based on competition for acceptance and privileges certain groups or social identities over others.

Sedgwick's views of universalizing or minoritizing sexual orientation difference is of particular relevance to this study, as the victimizing of lesbians in sport, or *those perceived to be lesbians*, serves only to further inhibit and deter the participation of all women. For example, if a woman ventures into sporting practices that are seen as masculine and male owned, her femininity (read as

heterosexuality) is called into question and the derogatory use of the 'lesbian label' is used to limit and control her participation (Griffin, 1998). The significant negative social implications of being called 'lesbian' cause some heterosexual women to distance themselves from lesbians and see lesbians themselves as the problem, rather than the heterosexist nature of sport (Griffin, 1998). These concepts and their application to the study of females in sport will be discussed in significant detail in the next chapter.

In applying Sedgwick's concept of universalizing to the institution of sport and the education system, I envision an environment that is fully inclusive, rather than merely safe or hostile-free. Pharr (1988) suggests that we should not just focus on achieving rights or removing obstacles, but rather, we need to envision a world without oppression to achieve it. That becomes the responsibility of all of society, and not the sole burden of those most often victimized by virtue of their difference.

### **Terminology**

The heterosexualizing of women and the use of the lesbian label as 'accused social deviance' are powerful manifestations of homophobia. Homophobia is the traditional and historically familiar term used to describe an irrational fear and/or intolerance of homosexuals and homosexuality (Pharr, 1988). In relation, homonegativity can be described as: "a more inclusive term (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980), describing purposeful, not irrational, negative attitudes and behaviors towards nonheterosexuals" (Krane, 1996, p. 238). Krane

(1996) sees homonegativism reflected externally, in cultural beliefs and actions, and internally in individuals' reactions to these cultural beliefs. I have chosen to use the term homonegativism rather than homophobia in the current study as I am interested in learned, purposeful negative attitudes and behaviors and how they are manifested in girls' and women's sport in public school settings. It should also be noted, however, that the term homonegativism was a new and unfamiliar term to the study participants and all were much more familiar with the term homophobia. While we continued to use the term homonegativism throughout the interview, it was agreed upon that the two terms had many similarities and essentially (loosely) referred to a system of negative attitudes, beliefs and behaviors towards non-heterosexuals.

Also relative to any discussion of homophobia or homonegativity is the term heteronormativity. Heteronormativity, can be described as: "privilege [that] lies in heterosexual culture's exclusive ability to interpret itself as society.... as the very model of inter-gender relations, as the invisible basis of all community" (Warner, 1993, p. xxi). I see this as the other side of the same coin, one that reflects homonegativity on one side and heteronormativity on the other. While heteronormativity is descriptive and focuses on what is *compulsory* I have chosen to focus on what is considered *deviant* (homonegativity) and the attitudes and behaviors manifested in that belief. In hindsight it might have been helpful to use the term heteronormativity in my interviews, rather than homonegativity due to the fact that the term heteronormativity is commonly used in the discourse of anti-homophobia policies in the Vancouver school system. I was, however,

unaware of this fact at the time I designed the study, and so chose to use homonegativity during the interviews. While that was the case, I refer to homonegativity *and* heteronormativity frequently in my data analysis.

It is also important to note that in this study I use the terms 'lesbian' and 'non-heterosexual' predominately to describe girls and women who do not identify as heterosexual. The use of the term lesbian is used in the literature, by my interview participants, and for one of the participants, as one mode of self-identification. While my goal is to avoid an essentializing of sexual identity, the term lesbian is used strategically in particular political discourse to identify those women who do not regard themselves as bisexual, heterosexual, queer, questioning, or transgendered. I use the term 'gay' occasionally to represent both males and females who identify as homosexual exclusively. One male participant in the study self identifies as gay, as does one female participant (interchangeably with lesbian). I use the term non-heterosexual frequently to represent the diversity of sexual orientations not represented within the narrow and socially sanctioned category of heterosexuality. It must be noted that I am aware that the situating of hetero/non-hetero risks replicating the homo/hetero binary I attempt to problematize, and as well may be read as privileging heterosexuality by positioning all those as 'non' in reference to it. I contend, however, that while I could more ideally use the term 'queer' to represent the reality of sexuality as fluid and unstable, I wish to use terms that highlight the deeply entrenched social privileging of heterosexuality, by contrasting that which is *seen* as other (or non). The use of the terms surrounding sexual orientation will

be discussed further in the literature review and data analysis chapters as language and terms of identification and self-identification are elemental to the discourse of females in sport.

### **Positionality**

As a lesbian and ex-athlete myself, I have considerable personal interest in this topic. While I studied and pondered the fluidity of sexuality and sexual orientation, I have felt most comfortable self-identifying as a lesbian. I first recognized myself as a lesbian during my years as an athlete at the university level. I kept my sexual orientation a secret, and although I suspected that a few of my teammates, and at least one coach were likely lesbians/non-heterosexual, the topic was never discussed privately or publicly. We lived and played in a world of silence, acutely aware of the pervasive nature of heteronormativity. I experienced fear of disclosure of my non-heterosexuality and carefully guarded it to avoid possible (likely) ostracism. Due to this splintering of identity, unable to speak freely about who I was, who I loved and lived with, I frequently engaged in a number of the self depreciating behaviors noted in the research (Bobbe, 2002; Fusco, 1995,1998; Griffin, 1998; Krane, 1996) such as alcohol abuse, isolation and sexual exploits with men (usually male athletes) in order to 'pass' as heterosexual. In later years I denied my relationship with my female partner (I fell in love with my university roommate), and experienced feelings of loneliness and isolation.



While I was not totally conscious of these feelings until I entered university, I am aware now of some of the reasons why I did not fit into the heterosexual focused dating culture of high school. My identity development was influenced by the dominant feminine/social/sexual cultural manifestations of heterosexuality. Had I had an open and inclusive environment to explore my sexuality, sexual orientation and social identity, I would likely have not experienced the feelings of isolation and separateness that I was subjected to in high school and later in university. It is within the context of this personal life experience that I engage in this research. It is also important to note that my experience as a woman and a lesbian athlete has had significant impact on my choice to study the coaches of female athletes. While homonegativity is also prevalent in male sport (Coakley, 2001; Curry, 1991; Messner, 1996; Pronger, 1990, 1999), as someone who experienced discrimination in sport both as a female, and a lesbian, I am particularly interested in the experiences of females and how their coaches' attitudes surrounding gender and sexuality affect their athletic experience.

At 45, I have now been open about my lesbianism for over 20 years. My partner of 11 years and I are raising our three children in an atmosphere of honesty and self-acceptance, with a focus on creating a climate free of gender and sexual orientation stereotyping and restriction. We do not hide the nature of our family, and partially due to the choices we have made as to where we live and raise our children, have suffered no 'blatant' discrimination. It is with this feeling of confidence and self-assuredness as a lesbian that I entered into this

research with enough distance from the issue to be comfortable and able to collect and analyze the data with clarity and comprehensibility. My past, however, is part of me and I have a significant personal interest in this research. It is my hope that this study may contribute to the further elimination of homonegativism on high school girls' sports teams and the broadening of experience to include personal satisfaction, acceptance and support for females that encompasses their athletic experience and their self-identified sexual orientation.

### **Gaps in the research**

The interconnectedness of sexism, homonegativity and heterosexism shape and colour girls' and women's participation in sport. How is their sport experience manifested, and/or compromised in a climate that may be hostile, or at the very least, limited to notions of 'acceptable' sexual orientation? Within the last decade, there has been a moderate amount of research conducted on the negative experiences of lesbians in sport, primarily those participating at the college level (Blinde and Taube, 1992b; Fusco, 1995; Kauer, 2002; Krane, 1997). As well, there is a significant body of research surrounding the experience of lesbian phys. ed. teachers (Burton Nelson, 1991; Cahn, 1994b; Sykes, 1998; Woods, 1992) and lesbian coaches (Galst, 1997; Griffin, 1998; Iannota & Kane, 2002; Wellman and Blinde, 1997). Most specifically investigated are the nature and severity of homophobia/homonegativism experienced, and the resulting response of many lesbians to hide their sexual orientation in order to continue participation, teaching, or coaching. There has, however, been little investigation

at the high school level regarding the female athletes' experience in either physical education classes or extra-curricular sports or their coaches' attitudes, behaviors and approaches to sexism or homonegativity as it pertains to their female athletes.

Due to my own past experience as an athlete in extra-curricular sports, the both rewarding and challenging experience it presented, and the powerfully influential impact my coaches had on me, I have chosen to focus on high school girls' extra-curricular sports and the attitudes and behaviors of their coaches. There has been little attention paid to coaches, who may have the most significant influence on the extra-curricular athlete's participation. I focus on high school coaches specifically due to my interest in the fact that high school athletes are experiencing adolescence and with it, a wide variety of thoughts, emotions and feelings related to sexual identity. Concurrently, they are developing attitudes, beliefs and values surrounding their own sexuality and that of their peers.

Adolescence is a time of growth, development and experimentation for many young women, including the development of their sexual identity and, for those who are physically active, their identity as an athlete. High school experience has a significant impact on adolescents and the coach can be a highly influential and significant key player in the young female athlete's life (Griffin, 1994; Griffin, Perrotti, Priest & Muska, 2002; Perrotti and Westheimer, 2001). It is the coach who sets the tone of the team, the ground rules for participation, team climate, culture and the boundaries for conduct (Griffin, et al.,

2002; Perrotti and Westheimer, 2001). As stated in the opening paragraphs of this study, I investigate the strategies high school coaches employ to provide an inclusive and safe environment for high school female athletic participation, with special attention to those female athletes who do not self-identify as heterosexual. I hope to make a strong contribution to the literature in this field, as I know of no other study with this particular focus. While a hostile environment, manifested in homonegative attitudes and behaviors, is employed to control all females in sport, it is particularly threatening to the lesbian/non-heterosexual athlete. The consistent message is that they are not welcome, and in order to continue participation, many will engage in exhausting, self-splintering and self depreciating behaviors to hide their non-heterosexuality (Fusco, 1995; Griffin, 1998, 2001; Krane, 1996).

### **Answering the question and interpreting the data**

It was the initial goal of this investigation to shed light on how coaches can contribute to a positive environment for high school lesbians' sport participation, and what can be learned, improved and reproduced through awareness and education. In order to answer this question I invited high school coaches of girls' team sports in the Vancouver School District who are employing strategies to limit and/or eliminate homonegativism on their teams to discuss them with me in interviews. I conducted five interviews which provided rich and textured data, and although it was not always the data I expected, it served to illuminate the coaching practices of the participants, and contributed significantly to my goals

regarding the recognition and eradication of homonegativity in girl's high school sports.

Finally, it is important to state that the stories that I relate are partial and situated ones and are relayed through my analytical lens and personal interpretation. It is my overarching goal to use the data with integrity and honesty, but the excerpts I chose to use are reflective of personal interpretation of what is of importance in this study and the theoretical and analytical framework I worked within.

In this chapter I have laid out the framework, and indicated the direction and scope, of the current study. I have provided a bird's eye perspective on my theoretical framework, outlined the terminology I will be using and described my positionality in the research. I have also situated the current study, describing how it fills a gap in the current knowledge in the field of homonegativity in girls' and women's sports, and finally, I have described how I approach the analysis of the data. In chapter two I provide a review of the current literature available on this topic and in chapter three I explain my research design and related methodology. In chapters four and five I apply my theoretical orientation to the data from the participant interviews, illustrating those themes that emerged and provided the most salient and interesting discussion. In the final chapter, I summarize and conclude my findings, propose the implementation of strategies to reduce and eliminate homonegativity in girl's high school sports, and provide recommendations for future research directions.

## **Chapter Two**

### **The Violation of Gender Norms: Sport as Contested Terrain**

Central to understanding my study is the existing literature surrounding a number of key concepts I return to throughout: the violation of gender norms, sport as contested terrain and the use of the 'lesbian' label, homophobia, and homonegativism. I will also examine here what I call 'the paradox of sport', and eliminating homophobia and homonegativism in girls' and women's sport. I review these topics in light of the limited research available on homophobia and homonegativism in school athletics and the more specific role the coach plays in the lives of high school athletes and his or her role in effectively interrupting and eliminating homonegativism. A review of the literature clearly illustrates the gendered nature of sports and athletics generally, the prevalence of homonegativism in both sports and athletics, and the barriers they create. As well, this review will reveal that issues of sexuality in athletics are shrouded in silence and secrecy, creating barriers to effective change.

#### **Disrupting and resisting gender norms in sport**

While women's participation in sport has grown steadily and significantly over the last century, it has done so under threat and hostility from many who see athleticism as the last male bastion and an inappropriate place for female participation (Cahn, 1994a; Lenskyj, 2003; Theberge & Birrell, 1994a, 1994b). It has become clear that while sport and physical activity are irrefutably proven to

be as beneficial to the physical and mental health of women as they are to men, the climate and culture of sport still resonate with attitudes of male superiority and exclusivity (Griffin, 1998; Sabo & Messner, 2001; Theberge, 2000; Theberge & Birrell, 1994c).

Studies of female athletes and their place in the gender order of male dominated sports often begin with a look at the patriarchal nature of a thoroughly gendered North American society. Mariah Burton Nelson (1994), for example, explores male domination and women's violation of gender norms. She argues that men point to their greater size and strength, and award these qualities with value, thereby justifying to themselves a two-tiered gender system with men on top. In discussions regarding male dominance in sport and the response to the argument that "it's just a game", Burton Nelson (1994) notes: "...baseball and other manly sports are more than games. They constitute a culture" (p. 7). This 'culture' has significant ramifications for women as it both reflects and reifies the dominance of men, and the subordination of women in the broader culture beyond sport. Female participation threatens the once clear boundaries of masculinity and femininity. When women play sport, it can no longer be used as a yardstick of masculinity (Burton Nelson, 1994). In the theorizing of Burton Nelson, sport is understood as contested terrain, a place where the struggles between, and over the nature of gender norms, are waged. Sport is used as a tool to define male superiority and relegates female athletes to second class status (Anderson, 1999; Burton Nelson, 1991, 1992). When girls and women become involved it is feared that they *dilute* the masculine 'nature' attributed to

sports. It is this fear that is the basis of the perceived threat of sporting women to male social superiority.

A long history of male participation and dominance in sport has led to resistance to women's increasing participation (Cahn, 1994a). If, historically, sport has been epitomized by cultural ideals and stereotypes of masculinity such as size, strength, aggression and dominance, women's participation troubles taken-for-granted gender boundaries and binary cultural roles assigned to men and women. The disruption of this binary calls into question the privileged position of men in sport and in cultural contexts in the broader social sphere.

Lois Bryson (1994) concurs with Burton Nelson (1994) and Cahn (1994a) stating, "Sport is a powerful institution through which male hegemony is constructed and reconstructed" (p. 47), and argues that the maintenance of hegemony in sport "crucially privileges males and inferiorizes women" (p. 48). She carries this argument further however, questioning whether it is worthwhile for women to continue to participate in the male dominated institution of sport. Bryson (1994) suggests that due to the maintenance of male hegemony, many female athletes internalize the belief that men's sporting practices are superior to their own. She also acknowledges that attitudes reflecting male superiority and female incapability in sport are carried over and reinforced in other cultural institutions. Bryson (1994) describes the ways in which women's sports are systematically controlled by men, ignored by the media, and *if* they are recognized, their sporting efforts are likely to be trivialized in comparison to male performances. She concludes, however, that if women withdraw from the male



dominated sporting arena in response to discriminatory practices and internalized beliefs of inferiority, we risk supporting masculine hegemony rather than working to eliminate it (Bryson, 1994).

Based on my own experience, I concur with Bryson's argument that while there is considerable opposition to girls and women in sport, withdrawing from a sporting life is not an attractive option. While there is much work left to do, there has been considerable advancement of opportunities for girls and women in sport in the last century (Coakley, 2001). To disregard the entire sport system as flawed and misogynistic, offering no positive experiences for female participation, is to do both sport and female athleticism a disservice. There are those in the sport system, including the coaches in the current study, who support females in athletics and believe they should be afforded a variety of opportunities for participation. It is the goal of this study to build on those positive efforts and to further employ strategies to improve the sporting climate for female participation.

Don Sabo and Michael Messner (2001) suggest that: "Sport is one of many interconnected institutional sites such as family, government, religion, and the health care system where many women, and sometimes men, are challenging sexist attitudes, and discriminatory practices" (p. 26). They specifically recognize that "the symbolic and physical empowerment of women through athletic participation is challenging masculine hegemony in sport and society" (p. 28). This is further evidence that there is a cracking of the historically entrenched domination of men in sport. Nancy Theberge and Susan Birrell

(1994c) support the notion of gendering sport and women's resistance to masculine hegemony, by making the following argument:

If sport is a cultural space where gender relations that generally favor men are produced, preserved, and publicly celebrated, then women's involvement in sport can be seen as a form of resistance that disturbs the (apparently precarious) logic of male supremacy. (p. 342).

To provide a context for investigating female resistance in sport, Theberge and Birrell (1994c) present an in-depth analysis of the structural constraints facing women in sport in the United States, the ideological control of women, and an exploration of feminist resistance and transformation in sport. They make a particularly strong statement regarding how women in sport are represented in the United States media, and how this construction reinforces the notion of differences between men and women, placing women in a subordinate position to men. Theberge and Birrell (1994c) observe that:

Media coverage of sport today does not simply exclude and ignore women, trivialize or marginalize women, de-athleticize or deny power to women; it constructs women and men and the difference between the two in such a way as to present gender differences as an important and natural feature of social life. Moreover, it constructs women who transgress the boundaries as "unnatural" and thus "denatures" them as athletes and women. (p. 354-355).

Concurring with, and expanding on, Bryson's statement regarding how women in sport are underrepresented and trivialized in the media, Theberge and Birrell suggest that gender differences between men and women in sport are representative of how it 'should be' in larger social settings. While it may first appear that Theberge and Birrell's only emphasis is on further vilifying the media, a broader reading might interpret this critique as increasing our understanding of the consequences of reifying biased gender roles for all of us, not simply male

and female athletes. In this case, Theberge and Birrell's critique centres on the explicit construction of women's participation in gender terms in comparison to men's. Women in sport are viewed and represented first and foremost as women (particularly (hetero)sexualized women serving the male gaze, as in pornography), and only secondarily as athletes (Anderson, 1999; Kolnes, 1995). This powerful media promotion serves to reinforce the view of male superiority in sports and women's participation as inferior, insignificant, and even unnatural. The power of hegemonic gender beliefs and expectations in the context of female participation is of particular interest to this study. Like many members of society, coaches are exposed regularly to gendered portrayals of female athletes and consequently may adopt a view of female athletes in negative gender terms. The noteworthy difference is that coaches are in a unique position to positively affect the level of participation for females and have significant influence over the nature and quality of that participation.

In the Canadian setting, Lenskyj (1986) further investigates the means by which female athletic subordination is maintained. If women are involved in sports, social acceptance dictates that they maintain the image of femininity as defined by social standards. Lenskyj states, "As the dominant sex, men rewarded – and continue to reward – female athletes who satisfied stereotyped heterosexual standards of femininity in their appearance and in the performance of their sport" (p. 56). In other words, in sports where femininity is not only encouraged, but is rewarded through success of the athlete in competition,

women are allowed to participate, but concurrently, social control and acceptability are maintained.

Building on this theme of the 'policing of femininity' in sport, Krane (2001a) argues, "The underlying message is that athleticism and femininity are contradictory, and females have to go out of their way to show that they can be athletic and socially accepted" (p. 116). It is important to note that femininity is expressed and performed in a variety of ways by female athletes of all sexual orientations. Femininity, as a form of personal expression in sport or other social sites, is in itself not derisive or inappropriate. I argue, however, that it *can* be used as a tool to sexualize and more importantly 'heterosexualize' the female athlete. While the term 'feminine' is used consistently in broad social discourse to describe the desired image of female athletes (by coaches, managers, promoters), it is really a code word for 'heterosexual' (Griffin, 1992; Hall, 1996; Krane, 2001a; Lenskyj, 1997). In this context, the expression of femininity, in association with athletic participation, can be read as an 'apology' by women for transgressing gender boundaries through sport participation, which is still seen as a male domain (Kolnes, 1995). It is important to state, however, that while some women may express manifestations of femininity to deflect speculation regarding their sexuality, or as a social concession for their sports participation, it is imperative not to assume that a female athlete's expression of femininity is always contrived or forced. Regardless of whether feminine expression is chosen or assigned, feminizing (heterosexualizing) may serve to present the female athlete as a sexualized object of entertainment. The 'gaze' which this process

assumes and privileges is male and heterosexual and is afforded significant economic and social power. It therefore often dictates how women in general, and female athletes in particular, are presented and represented (Hair-Muir, 1998).

In her discussions of gender and sport, Nancy Theberge (2000) focuses on the practice of 'feminizing' women in sport in an attempt to heterosexualize them to meet cultural expectations. She notes that this is most evident in the promotion of a 'feminine, heterosexual image' of women golfers in the LPGA. Theberge states that while frustrated with this preoccupation with a feminine/heterosexual image, tour members:

believe that pressures to obtain corporate and media support require the Tour to present an acceptable image, which is one of emphasized heterosexuality. In order to conform to this image, players devote considerable attention to their appearance, particularly their style of dress. (p. 325).

The powerful implication here is that society reads a 'feminine' appearance as heterosexual and the only acceptable athletic image for women. While femininity and sexuality/sexual orientation are not directly correlative, coaches, the media, promoters, and sponsors may dictate that female athletes present an emphasized performance of femininity to ensure the female athlete is 'read' as heterosexual (Hair-Muir, 1998; Kolnes, 1995). In order to continue participation, the female athlete may conform to this level of performance even if it may feel uncomfortable or inappropriate for her (Blinde and Taub, 1992a; Griffin, 2001). The pressure to conform may be subtle, such as a mild suggestion, or explicit, such as the withholding of sponsorship dollars unless the athletes image is

deemed appropriate (Cahn, 1994a; Fusco, 1998; Griffin, 2001; Kolnes, 1995). Regardless of its form, there are strict gender expectations for female athletes. The message is clear that if female athletes appear too 'masculine' the sport itself will suffer the 'lesbian' stigma, the sports reputation will be damaged, and consequently rejected by the viewing (heterosexual male) audience (Coakley, 2001; Hair-Muir, 1998; Plymire and Forman, 2000; Theberge, 2000).

Griffin (1998) concurs, stating: "The concern is not that women athletes are too plain, out of style, or don't have good grooming habits. The real fear is that women athletes will look like dykes, or even worse, are dykes" (p. 68). The practice of heterosexualizing athletes by those who control their participation can be described as bordering on soft porn (Griffin, 1998; Mikosza, and Phillips, 1999). The continual emphasis on femininity 'as' heterosexuality is displayed in such sports as figure skating, synchronized swimming, body building, tennis, and gymnastics. Female athletes participating in these sports are effectively heterosexualized through dress, and makeup as an integral aspect of participation and athletic reward. Feminine aesthetics, in other words, are understood to contribute to success of the sport (Mennesson & Clement, 2003).

One concern that remains is that female athletes spend excessive and unnecessary time meeting a heterosexual standard of appearance that has nothing to do with their athletic participation and performance. The performance becomes focused around their sexuality, rather than their athletics, and this relegates their status as athletes to second class. Of even greater consequence is that if the female athlete refuses to conform to the imposed image of

heterosexuality she may be denied participation either subtly (she may drop out due to a hostile or unwelcoming climate) or explicitly (she may be denied participation or cut from the team) (Griffin, 2001; Lenskyj, 2003; Mennesson & Clement, 2003). As a key player in the sport system, a coach can choose to support and enforce a mandatory image of heterosexuality for his or her female athletes. In contrast, he or she can also chose to resist this reification of gender norms, and instead support and encourage female athletes to express their gender and sexual identity in the manner in which they are most comfortable.

As female athletes move their participation along the socially constructed feminine/masculine sport continuum<sup>1</sup> to sports generally perceived as somewhat gender neutral (ie. basketball and soccer), and further, to those sports perceived as masculine and male owned (ie. baseball, ice hockey and rugby), the accusations of homosexuality become more threatening. In turn, the strategies to fend off the accusations, such as the adoption of a feminized (read socially as heterosexualized) image through dress, mannerisms, and hairstyle become more intense. This image is cultivated in order to deflect speculation that they may be lesbians; speculation which coaches, managers, and promoters feel may negatively affect the image of the sport (ie. LPGA). Fear abounds that if the sport is seen as a 'lesbian' sport, the male viewing audience will be lost and promoters and sponsors, and possibly the female athlete herself, may suffer financially (Plymire and Forman, 2000; Theberge, 2000).

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<sup>1</sup> While the social construction of femininity/masculinity is 'essentially' expressed as a binary, the lived reality is of a complex and highly diverse expression of femininity and masculinity and many shades between. While the term 'continuum' still implies a linear concept, (this in itself is imaginary), for my purposes it serves to represent a social reality in sport.

The heterosexualizing of female athletes also creates a distancing from male athletes, illuminating clear gender boundaries and reminding women that they are being allowed to participate in the male sanctioned activity of sport only if they participate as distinctly female heterosexual athletes (Anderson, 1999; Cahn, 1994a; Griffin, 1998). Griffin states:

If women coaches and athletes could freely choose among a range of appearance styles without jeopardizing their heterosexual image, then the issue of coaching attire and hairstyles would be unimportant.... Homophobia and heterosexism in women's athletics, however, transform the choice of clothing, hairstyle and other personal appearance decisions into important statements about sexual identity and gender (1998, p. 73-74).

The constant policing of dress and appearance limits the individual expression of a variety of women athletes, both heterosexual and non-heterosexual.

Regardless of when and how they profess to present themselves along the femininity/masculinity continuum, they are reminded that their gender and sexuality count significantly in defining them in athletics and are effectively used to limit and control their participation.

Femininity, masculinity and the expression of these qualities are particularly relevant to the development of sexual and social identity in junior and high school (Eder, Evans & Parker, 1995; Epstein, 1997). While young women athletes are navigating the waters of social and sexual identity formation, they are likewise establishing their identity as physical beings and female athletes. Many young women may feel significantly conflicted due to the imposed pressure to conduct themselves within a socially approved feminine persona, and the enforced gender norms in sport only add to that pressure. Athletes, both male



and female, are forced to function within the definitive binary categories of female/male, feminine/masculine within the broader context of heterosexuality. Therefore the high school female athlete, regardless of how she may self-identify (straight, bisexual, lesbian, queer, non-heterosexual, transgendered or questioning) is left with a very limited and possibly highly conflicted expression of her social/sexual/athletic identity.

### **The construction of gender in sport**

A discussion of girls and women in sport must reflect an analysis of the binary categorization of male/female, masculine/feminine, heterosexuality/non-heterosexuality which 'essentializes' the construction of gender and sexuality in North American society. While I am aware of the pitfalls of essentializing the experience of girls and women, including lesbians in sport, it is necessary that I determine an appropriate manner in which to approach gender and sexual identity and orientation in this project. In light of the theoretical framework I outlined in chapter one, my goal is to review relevant literature on gender construction, specifically as it applies to sport and come to a viable perspective that recognizes the commonality among females in sport without overly essentializing their experience.

Susan Cahn (1994a) devotes considerable time to culturally constructed notions of gender and the constraints they produce on, and within, sport in the North American context. She describes the administering of masculinity/femininity (M/F) tests in the 1950's and how interest in particular

sports defined the relative masculinity or femininity of an individual (Cahn, 1994a). Mediated through the authoritative voice of science, "M/F tests served to not only measure but to instruct, offering the American public a training manual in appropriate gender behavior" (Cahn, 1994a, p. 226). Those administering and interpreting the tests judged females who expressed interest in male defined sports, as deficient, rather than questioning whether the flaw might lie in the culture-bound concept of 'masculine sport' (Cahn, 1994a).

This circular logic formed a system in which the belief that particular sports were intrinsically masculine or feminine served to entrench the common attitude and opinion that gender was by nature associated with sex difference. When gender is understood as a social construction, however, the fact that boys were more likely to pursue football rather than figure skating reflected social norms of hegemonic masculinity. Boys and men were expected to be interested in power and particular types of performance sports to be considered masculine, and therefore 'normal'. Likewise, girls were educated with the same culturally entrenched gender role beliefs, a practice that served to shore up unequal relations of power between men and women.

Hargreaves (2000) also tackles the reification of gender norms and their connection to sexuality categorization. She builds on Cahn's (1994a) exploration of early North American essentialized approaches to gender and sport, by applying Butler's denaturalizing of gender and its performative qualities to her work. Hargreaves acknowledges that the very notion, politics, and categories of identity have been called into question in recent years provoking the birth of

'queer' theory, which problematizes gender and sexual identity as stable and concrete concepts. In response to the challenges facing the construction, and therefore societal recognition of a lesbian 'identity' and its problematic nature, Hargreaves acknowledges that "lesbian women in sport are not a homogenous group, [however] sport can provide for them a refuge from structured discrimination in mainstream (heterosexual) sport or in wider society, providing a logic for the lesbian label and lesbian consciousness" (2000, p. 134). Hargreaves recognizes the dangers of essentializing the 'lesbian sport experience', but she also acknowledges the reality that many sporting women with a variety of sexual orientations, and specifically lesbians, may find comfort, enjoyment and support in the company of other women/lesbians. This is of particular importance and value, given that their participation may take place 'within' a sport environment that may not fully support them and in fact, may be hostile towards them.

Krane (2001b) also evaluates the role of gender, the standpoint of women, the application of queer theory, and the position and identities of lesbians in sport. She describes the unique situation of women who identify as lesbians as having a different perspective from the dominant (heterosexual) group. This allows them a standpoint<sup>2</sup> that places them in sport on the 'inside', while maintaining an outsider's viewpoint (Krane, 2001b). Krane (2001b) argues that "lesbians in sport interpret situations, through a different lens [than heterosexual women], one colored by heterosexism" (p. 404). Krane acknowledges the sexist confines of sport within which women participate, and further recognizes that

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<sup>2</sup> Standpoint is defined here as expressing a common identity and shared understanding among individuals in similar social circumstances.

lesbians are also burdened with heterosexism. Krane (2001b) also proposes, as previous feminist researchers have noted, there need not be one feminist 'standpoint', but more realistically, multiple 'standpoints' that overlap and intersect (Krane, 2001b).

At this point, Krane makes the argument that there is commonality between the conceptualization of 'multiple standpoints' of feminist standpoint theory and the valuing of differences emphasized in queer theory. Turning to an application of a queer perspective in studying women and lesbians in sport, Krane suggests that the deconstructing of the binary categorization of gender and sexuality reflected in queer theory is very helpful in the study of sport psychology. Krane explains: "to understand women's and especially lesbians' experience in sport, we must question and contest assumptions about hegemonic masculinity and femininity, heterosexuality, and homosexuality." (p. 406). By questioning gender assumptions we can arrive at a more equitable and less limiting model for female sports participation. Krane (2001b) argues there is enough common ground between queer and standpoint perspectives to combine them in the study of females in sport. For example, in addition to the suggestion that acknowledging multiple standpoints echoes queer theory's valuing of difference, she highlights feminist standpoint and queer theory's common view that identity is socially constructed. On this premise, Krane (2001b) states, "through a feminist queer perspective, I highlight the interactions among gender, sexual orientation, and culture" (p. 408).

While Krane (2001b) contends that there is room for the co-existing of feminist standpoint and queer theories, in the study of females in sport, I argue that it is important not to over simplify each viewpoint, such that they lose their distinguishing features and intelligibility. In light of this caution, I believe it is possible to combine more *compatible* theoretical perspectives, than standpoint and queer epistemologies, to analyze and understand the inherent complexities of the study of girls and women in sport. A fusion of perspectives may serve to recognize value in, and avoid essentializing, female sexual identity and orientation in connection with her athletic experience.

Sykes (1998) elaborates on Krane's approach that combines perspectives and epistemologies. In doing so, I believe she provides a fusion of feminist and queer viewpoints that is more intelligible and workable than Krane's combining of feminist standpoint and queer theories. Sykes (1998) investigation focuses on the formation of gender and sexual boundaries of lesbians in physical education. Demonstrating "one way in which queer and feminist theories of sexuality can be combined to examine the relations between lesbian sexuality and heterosexualities," Sykes explores how the concept of lesbian as 'other' is reinforced by the belief that heterosexuality is the 'normative natural' (p. 155). She suggests "one of the main purposes of the closet [veil of secrecy behind which lesbians in physical education function] is to discursively uphold the boundary between either/or, homo/hetero, and self/other." (p. 163). This perspective is of relevance to the current study in two ways. First, Sykes investigates the secrecy and silence surrounding non-heterosexuality in athletics,

a theme prominent in my own investigation. Second, she highlights how divisions are maintained between hetero and homo in order to effectively establish the two groups as distinctly separate, effectively disrupting any solidarity that may lead to systemic change.

I argue that the re-interpretation of boundaries, identities and frameworks provide a more accurate and contextualized understanding of women in sport. Sykes (1998), Hargreaves (2000) and Krane (2001b) recognize the value of a multi-perspective viewpoint and acknowledge that the female athletic experience is socially constructed and diverse, with socio-political underpinnings. That is, to recognize that while all women in sport are limited and damaged by heteronormativity and homonegativism, non-heterosexual women, specifically lesbians are at greater risk for persecution (Griffin, 1998). This reality underpins the current study and accounts for its specific focus on lesbian and other non-heterosexual female athletes. Specifically studied are the perceptions and practices of the coaches in relation to the homonegativity their non-heterosexual athletes may be experiencing.

A critique of gender as a powerfully entrenched framework for sport participation is essential to this study. This is due to the overwhelming evidence that sport, as a highly gendered arena, is secured as a male domain, a place to express and confirm masculinity effectively privileging male participation over female and heterosexuality over non-heterosexuality. This creates a male dominated sport system that denies opportunity and free choice to females under the threat of compulsory heterosexuality.

### **Homophobia, homonegativism and use of the lesbian label**

In light of the previous discussion on the construction of gender norms and how they are manifested in sport, 'homophobia', the hatred or fear of homosexuality and homosexual persons (Pharr, 1988), is central to the discussion and investigation of girls and women in sport. As previously stated in chapter one, while homophobia is a common historical term, the term homonegativism refers to purposeful, not irrational, negative attitudes and behaviors towards non-heterosexuals. Because I am interested in 'purposeful' rather than irrational attitudes and behaviors and how they are used to justify, deny, and limit female sports participation I use the term homonegativity in this study. As many of the authors I refer to use the term homophobia, I will do so when citing their work. I do not see this as problematic as the terms are both embedded in a foundation that describes discrimination against, and oppression of those identified as non-heterosexual. While the terms differ in a description of the motives and mindset of those expressing negative attitudes and behaviors, they are closely enough related to discuss together in conjunction with concerns around female sport participation. As was also previously stated, I will use the terms heteronormativity and heterosexism when appropriate.

The manifestations of homonegativity surrounding lesbians in sport, as noted previously, begin at an early age. This takes the form of 'feminizing' girls to impose and ensure a compulsory heterosexual identity. These processes of feminizing such as social pressure to act, dress, gesture, in a socially prescribed 'feminine' manner are particularly salient for high school girls who may be

vulnerable to peer pressure and seek social acceptance. Further, girls and women may experience negative institutional policies and practices while in college or university. "Players suspected of lesbianism may be dismissed from their positions on the team, lose their scholarships, or be passed over in the selection of elite teams" (Theberge, 2000 as quoted in Iannotta & Kane, 2002, p. 350). Homonegativism operates in other ways to prevent girls and women's full participation in sport. For example, Theberge and Birrell (1994b) state "there may be a lack of support for team sports thought to be closely associated with masculine or lesbian images (e.g., rugby, football, softball)" (p. 338). Lesbian athletes might also be shunned by their teammates, who might refuse to room with them on road trips or refuse to change clothes or shower when they are in the locker room (Griffin, 2001; Harris, 2005). These attitudes, actions and behaviors reflect the stereotypical fear that lesbians pose a sexual threat to other women (Griffin, 2001).

Female coaches are also at risk. Iannotta and Kane (2002) state, "their sexual practices are policed by administrators, colleagues and even their own athletes" (p. 350). Female coaches have reported dating and engaging in sexual relationships with men to reduce suspicion about their sexual orientation (Burton Nelson, 1991; Fusco, 1998; Griffin, 2001). Lesbian coaches are also more vulnerable to losing their jobs if they advocate for equitable distribution of their athletic department's resources (Galst, 1997). As well, 'negative recruiting practices may be used by a coach who may suggest to a potential athlete or her parents, that another coach or team has a lesbian reputation, to dissuade recruits



from playing for a rival coach (Griffin, 2001; Wellman and Blinde, 1997). Finally, homonegativism is often the basis for discrimination in decisions about hiring and firing women in coaching and administrative positions (Lenskyj, 2003; Theberge and Birrell, 1994b; Wellman and Blinde, 1997).

Pat Griffin (1992) states, "homophobia is a powerful political weapon of sexism" (p. 252). Her extensive study of homophobia in North American sport has led her to argue that the "lesbian label is used to define the boundaries of acceptable female behavior in a patriarchal culture: When a woman is called a lesbian, she knows she is out of bounds" (1992, p. 252-253). Reflecting on her research in this field, Griffin (1992) states, "silence is the most consistent and enduring manifestation of homophobia in women's sport" (p. 253). The sacrifice of silence regarding homosexuality is thought to preserve the meager gains that have been made in women's sport. In her study of the history of gender and sexuality in sport in the American context, Susan Cahn describes the code of (lesbian) silence as "play it, don't say it" (Cahn, 1994a, p. 187). Commenting on this reflection, for the Canadian case, Lenskyj notes that this code is disturbingly similar to "don't ask, don't tell" and is equally as destructive (Lenskyj, 1997).

While much of the literature on lesbians in sport focuses on American intercollegiate athletes, Caroline Fusco (1995) also notes the strategy of silence and denial in her research on lesbians in Canadian university sport. She quotes Peper in her discussion of this tactic, "sports associations and governing bodies rarely address or acknowledge the existence of lesbian athletes, indeed there seems to be an unwritten yet understood agreement among associations,

governing bodies, and athletes to avoid direct discussion on lesbian issues” (cited in Fusco, 1995, p. 67). The lack of response or the addressing of this issue by those who control sport can be read as a condoning of derogatory attitudes and behaviors regarding lesbians in sport. This is evidence of the profoundly damaging denial and lack of responsibility of governing organizations to address discrimination based on sexual orientation.

The code of silence and the unwillingness to discuss homonegativism and lesbian issues in female sports is evident in the high school system as well (Griffin, 1994). Due to the positions of power and influence they hold in the school sport system, it is particularly crucial for high school coaches to take an assertive and anti-homonegative stance in creating a climate of inclusivity and acceptance (Griffin 1994; Griffin, et al., 2002; Perrotti and Westheimer, 2001). It is also imperative that we not lay the burden of combating homonegativity in sport *solely* on the shoulders of individual coaches. The problem of homonegativity is a systemic one and therefore requires a systemic approach. This raises a question that is central to this study: Are high school coaches receiving the training and support they need from the school system to effectively deal with the issue of homonegativism on the teams they are coaching? If those who are governing and controlling the broader school experience are not tackling homonegativism, they are serving to support the status quo, and athletes (and all school personnel) are left to fend for themselves, struggling against odds that may be overwhelming.

Griffin (1992) further discusses the underlying beliefs that keep girls and women in sport from challenging homonegativism. Two of these beliefs are critical to this study. The first is the belief that the 'problem' is lesbians in sport who call attention to themselves. Griffin (1992) states, "people who believe this assume that as long as lesbians are invisible, our presence will be tolerated and women's sport will progress" (p. 259). It is at this point that Griffin makes a particularly astute and insightful observation: "Women in sport must begin to understand that it wouldn't matter if there were no lesbians in sport. The lesbian label would still be used to intimidate and control women's athletics" (1992, p. 259). Griffin is speaking to the heart of the matter – that issues of power and control are at play, and sexuality is the weapon of choice. The powerful negative social stigma associated with non-heterosexuality, in this case specifically lesbianism, is used to further subordinate females and limit their participation choices through the threat of the 'lesbian' label.

The second belief is connected to the underlying fear on the part of lesbian athletes of being outed and is integrally related to the myth that women's sport can progress without dealing with homophobia (Griffin, 1992). These beliefs are grounded in the core belief that it is the women athletes (lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual) themselves who are the 'problem', rather than the patriarchal culture in which women's athletics is imbedded. These beliefs produce fertile ground for the use of the accusation of lesbian to deter female participation. It also creates a climate of hostility, silence and resentment of the lesbian athlete or any female athlete that does not conform to a compulsory heterosexual image.

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The feared result is that women's sport will be stigmatized as 'lesbian' and the reputation of female athletics will be irreparably damaged.

Blinde and Taub (1992a, 1992b) have also studied the impact of the lesbian label (or accusation) on female athletes. In discussions with 24 intercollegiate female athletes in the United States, Blinde and Taub (1992b) detected a variety of techniques used by female athletes to distance themselves from the lesbian label. They employ Becker's term "falsely accused deviant" to illustrate how female athletes are arbitrarily called lesbian, regardless of their known or perceived sexual orientation. Blinde and Taube (1992b) use the term 'deviant' to echo the negative social stigma associated with lesbianism. This is reflective of Griffin's theory that regardless of the presence of lesbians in sport, the label is still likely to be employed to inhibit and deter female participation at all levels. Many girls and women are discouraged from participating to avoid being associated with or accused of lesbianism and its negative cultural connotation (Blinde and Taub, 1992b; Cahn, 1994a; Griffin, 1992).

The use of the lesbian label is a powerful instrument of homonegativism. Krane (1996) sees homonegativism reflected externally, in cultural beliefs and actions, and internally in individuals' reactions to these cultural beliefs. Typically lesbians (and other non-heterosexuals) will learn culturally sanctioned anti-gay and lesbian prejudice before they realize their own sexual orientation, which may result in internalized homonegativism and self hatred (Bobbe, 2002; Human Rights Watch, 2001; Krane, 1996; Vealey, 1997). It is this internalized set of beliefs held by female athletes, both heterosexual and non-heterosexual, that

may be responsible, at least in part, for the feelings of irritation with lesbian athletes who challenge homonegativism within sport (Theberge and Birrell, 1994b). This is reflective of Griffin's exploration of the underlying belief that if homophobia/homonegativism was ignored, and lesbians remained silent and invisible, then women's sport would progress within a framework of male tolerance. This belief is inherently problematic as silence and denial serve only to reify the subordination of women in sport. While some may 'settle' for tolerance, many others are unwilling to do so. This is in light of a female sport history in which the choices of sport participation, the manner of that participation, personal choices regarding their expression as women as well as their sexual orientation have been, and remain, policed, controlled, and limited. The current system limits all women and in effect all men who might choose sport activities that exist outside constructed gender boundaries for males and females. In essence, the few who are being served by the current system enjoy a privilege that many others are denied. The silence of men and women, heterosexual, and non-heterosexual, playing and participating within a climate of 'tolerance' is deafening. In this study, I am particularly interested to determine if and how coaches are condoning or challenging this silence and invisibility.

As the coach has a significant role in deflecting and challenging the derogatory use of the lesbian label as a manifestation of homonegativity, he or she must be very cautious not to inadvertently reinforce the socially sanctioned use of 'lesbian as deviant' label. Jeff Perrotti and Kim Westheimer (2001) illustrate this paradox in a story regarding a high school coach's response to the

vandalizing of his team's field hockey pitch with the term 'FH lesbians'. They relate the following:

the coach demanded, "Get this off the field. I don't care if you have to dig it out... It's offensive every day and it's in your face" (*Boston Globe*, December 27, 1998). The coach's appropriate outrage at this harassment and intimidation can also be interpreted, interestingly enough, as a reinforcement of the assumption that one of the worst accusations to be leveled at a female athlete is that she is a lesbian (p. 76).

Significant insight is required to understand this complex social issue, and great care must be taken by the coach to approach the offensive behavior in such a way that it is effectively revealed as homonegativism and as unacceptable as any other form of harassment and discrimination. The coach in this situation might better have addressed this offensive act by unveiling it as an attack on women in sport through the weapon of homonegativism, and could have used this opportunity to highlight how women are marginalized in sport and sexuality and femininity constraints are used to deter and control their participation.

### **The paradox of sport**

With the unequivocal accounts of the reality of homonegativism in sport and the resulting negative personal consequences for lesbians, what is it that appeals to lesbians in the sport experience? What keeps them participating, and for many, going to great lengths to feminize their appearance, effectively expressing compulsory heterosexuality in order to maintain their place in the sport world? In her passionate and personal manner, Pat Griffin (1999) describes the desire of many lesbians to participate in sport and the long history of their participation:

Despite the covering and the camouflage, they knew that in sport they could be free. In sport their passions for women and play merged. It was a women's world where they found friendship and love. They could take pride in the grace and strength of their bodies and their athletic accomplishments. They cherished beloved teammates and were more at ease within themselves. In sport they were less constrained by feminine expectations imposed by the society around them. Sport was home, even with the silence (p. 53).

Griffin portrays sport as a haven for lesbians and other women who wished to be free of the social constraints of compulsory heterosexuality and the gender role expectations and limitations assigned to it. Even though there was 'covering and camouflage', once involved, women found solidarity with other like-minded women and a physical freedom not afforded them elsewhere in society.

Similarly, Lenskyj (1994) states, "lesbians occupy a central place in sport because both lesbianism and female sporting participation share common ground as activities that are incompatible with notions of hegemonic femininity" (p. 360). As evidence of this, Lenskyj reflects on Susan Cahn's 1993 interviews with women who tell their stories of coming out as lesbian in the 30's, 40's and 50's and participating in sport at a time when sport participation for women did not generally garner social approval. She also refers to her own examination of trends in physical education, the medical establishment and the media from 1890 to the 1980's, with a particular focus on Canada. She offers this description of the paradox of sport as both haven and hostile environment, for girls and women participating in this century as epitomized by compulsory femininity/heterosexuality:

On the one hand, women's sport provided a haven for women who preferred a homosocial environment, ostensibly free from pressure to behave and present oneself in a conventionally heterosexual manner, and

as such it was well known by lesbians as a place where one might find other lesbians. On the other hand, with growing public, media, and commercial interest in women's sport, the "femininity" of all female athletes came under scrutiny and the economic survival of female sport came to rely in large part on an appropriately feminine image (Lenskyj 1997, p. 11-12).

With this explanation, Lenskyj clarifies why the early participation of women in sport tended to be free of the femininity constraints often experienced by women in other social roles, and therefore a haven for lesbians (and other women) who enjoyed freedom from such constraints. Unfortunately, the success and popularity of women's sports proved to be the downfall for many women, including lesbians. The resulting media and public attention focused a light on the violation of femininity 'rules' and subsequently regulations regarding female sexual identity, appearance, gender expression and the nature of their participation in sport were imposed.

In her research with female Canadian university athletes who self-identified as lesbian, Fusco (1995) documents a further manifestation of the paradoxical experience of sport participation as both rewarding and freeing, while concurrently embedded within a sport system that may also be confining and even hostile towards them. Although many of the participants outline the rewards of their sport experience including camaraderie, physical expression and the exuberance of pushing their bodies to new physical limits, many reflect on the conflicted environment in which their experience was imbedded. One of Fusco's (1995) participants describes a sport experience that was rewarding in many ways, but also expresses disappointment that the experience was lacking in support and acceptance. This paradox of experience is noted time and again in



the literature. While a large number of lesbians and other women are carving out their 'sporting space' it is disappointing that they are doing so in an environment that does not support them. While lesbians and other women are drawn to sport for a variety of reasons, many continue to participate without complete freedom. What can be done to provide an environment that is more welcoming, supportive, free and encouraging? It is assumed in this study that the coach can significantly influence the sporting climate for females and contribute to a more positive experience for them.

Due to an absence of research, little is known about what contributes to a positive experience for high school lesbian athletes. Kerrie Kauer (2003) identifies lesbian collegiate athletes who experienced a positive climate in a mainstream sport setting, and who were united with their heterosexual teammates in combating heteronegativity, discrimination and stereotypes. Kauer's (2003) data revealed "heterosexual athletes defended their teammates when derogatory comments were made and were accepting of their lesbian and bisexual teammates." (p. 158). Further, Kauer (2003) concluded that:

The heterosexual athletes got to know the LB [lesbian] athletes on a personal level and valued them for the persons they were. The willingness of the teams to openly discuss sexual orientation instead of keeping these issues closeted fostered a healthy team environment (p. 158).

These are encouraging findings, confirming that it is possible to create an open, inclusive and respectful climate regarding issues of sexual orientation on women's sports teams. Both heterosexual and non-heterosexual athletes can benefit from a supportive sport environment that fosters self-esteem and social change. Further investigation to determine what coaches might be doing to foster

social change and create a similarly inclusive climate in high schools would be a worthy contribution to the goal of improving the lesbian sport experience.

### **Eliminating homonegativism in girls' and women's sport**

In reviewing the literature, it becomes apparent that homonegativism in girls and women's sport is prevalent. For a variety of personal, professional, social and political reasons, some athletes, coaches and administrators suggest that it is non-existent and that lesbians (and women in general) in sport are not discriminated against. It becomes evident, however, that what is at play here are the common strategies of silence and denial that Griffin (1992, 1998, 1999) and others have articulated (Blinde and Taub 1992a, 1992b; Burton Nelson, 1991, 1994; Cahn, 1994a, 1994b; Krane, 1996, 1997; Lenskyj, 1986, 1997). In the majority of studies conducted thus far in the North American context, lesbian athletes describe feelings of enjoying their sport experience enough to stay involved, but due to homonegativity, concurrently experience isolation, invisibility, fear, anxiety and low self-esteem.

In response to homonegativism, a common defensive tactic of lesbians is to 'cover' or 'pass' as heterosexual in an effort to be perceived as part of the normal mainstream and divert attention from their sexuality and avoid the negative consequences of the lesbian label. This type of behavior can lead to a discrepancy between one's personal and public life, a splintering of identity. The energy expended in this identity management can be considerable and highly isolating. A lesbian athlete may be constantly scrutinizing who is trustworthy and

safe to come out to. While they may live in fear of being ostracized by teammates, they also live under the very real fear of being cut from the team and denied participation if they are found out by homophobic coaches or sport administrators (Griffin, 2001).

The resulting consequences of these strategies and tactics are widespread, including depression, feelings of inferiority, self-hatred, distrust, alcohol and drug abuse, shame, anger and development of defensive strategies (Bobbe, 2002; Griffin, 1994; Krane, 1996). Fusco (1995) outlines similar negative findings in her Canadian study, noting that the lesbians she interviewed remained silent and secretive about their lesbian lives and developed coping strategies that reduced their trust in and limited their personal interaction with their teammates and coaches. Krane and Michalenok (1997) state: "homonegativism creates an environment that ultimately stigmatizes individuals and inhibits their personal and professional development" (p. 20). Krane (1996) also identifies the ultimate price that is paid, noting that the most extreme consequence of external homonegativism is suicide. Unfortunately, the focus in much of the literature lies with the individual responses of non-heterosexuals, rather than concentrating on the systemic prevalence and dilemma of homonegative attitudes and behaviors and their broader social implications. It is not the non-heterosexual that needs attending to as much as the system that perceives them as the problem (Chesir-Teran, 2003). The focus of the current study is to shine the investigation on the coach's role in the high school system to determine how they might challenge the

basis of systemic discrimination and contribute to the elimination of homonegativity in female high school sport.

Regardless of the well-documented realities of homonegativism in sport, there are also reasons to be encouraged that the sport environment for lesbians is showing some improvement. Perrotti and Westheimer (2001) note that:

In training and competition, athletes learn to take risks, display courage, and stand up for themselves and for their team. They develop leadership skills, self-discipline, and confidence in themselves and one another. These are the attributes that gay, lesbian, and bisexual athletes can use to come out and deal with challenging issues. They are also the qualities that their coaches and teammates can draw on when a player comes out (2001, p. 80).

They point out the uniqueness of the sport environment in the context of the high school climate and suggest drawing on the positive attributes of the athletic experience to tackle the issue of homonegativism head on. They suggest taking advantage of the leadership role athletes play in the school system and to use this forum to respond to antigay comments and show support for non-heterosexual athletes (Perotti and Westheimer, 2001). In particular, they suggest coaches have tremendous influence over their players as they spend a significant amount of time with them and are often aware of what is going on in students' lives (Perotti and Westheimer, 2001).

I agree with Perotti and Westheimer and argue that coaches have the power to establish standards of conduct as well as hold players accountable for their actions. The coach wields significant power and influence in determining how the team responds to individual players and is elemental in establishing a climate that can either prohibit or encourage a broad expression of identity and

individuality (Griffin, 1994; Griffin, et al., 2002). While a negative and discriminatory coach can shut down discussion, personal growth and individual and team development, an encouraging and supportive coach can provide direction and strategies for players when coping with the sexism and homophobia prevalent in high school athletics (Griffin, 1994; Griffin et al., 2002). The coach, along with others in positions of athletic authority, can significantly influence the sport environment to ensure it does not function as an exclusive club that denies and denigrates difference.

It is important to note, however, that regardless of the significant personal influence of coaches, they must also work within the political environment of the school and the larger educational system. This may be particularly difficult if they themselves fall outside typical gender roles or mainstream heterosexuality. In this context, taking an active stance in reducing and eliminating homonegativity on the teams they coach may draw attention to themselves, raising speculation regarding their gender/sexuality differences and in effect may place them at significant personal risk for discrimination.

While much of the literature focusing on homonegativity in sport concentrates on its prevalence and the damage it causes, there is also a growing body of literature that points out how systemic homonegativity in sports can be combated and effectively eliminated. These strategies, resources and recommendations will be discussed in the final chapter.

## Summary

The literature on females/lesbians in sport is rich with evidence that reveals the male dominance of sport, the threat of female participation, the construction of gender in sport, homonegativism experienced by lesbians and other females, and the paradox of lesbian participation. The predominate authors in this field (Blinde and Taub, Cahn, Fusco, Griffin, Hall, Krane, Lenskyj, Sykes, Theberge and Birrell) are in general agreement on the reasons for the reality of homonegativism, and the resulting negative consequences. As well, Perrotti and Westheimer provide insight into the nature of the high school climate and the resulting effects of coach participation in eliminating homonegativism.

Each of the authors in this literature provides evidence to support the argument that many lesbians are not experiencing the sports they are involved in to the full extent that they could. Although a variety of strategies to improve the climate for lesbians and all girls and women are discussed, what is lacking in the literature are specific accounts of coaches, particularly at the high school level, in implementing these strategies. Research that illuminates how high school coaches of girls' teams attempt to foster and create a homo-inclusive environment would be a valuable contribution to the literature. This contribution could also foster a better understanding of coaching methods that work to eliminate homonegativism in girls' and women's sport.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Developing a Research Plan: Methodological Considerations**

The qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations. (Kvale, 1996, p. 1)

There is a paucity of research investigating and interpreting strategies coaches of high school girls' sports teams use to combat and eliminate homonegativism on the teams they coach. In order to address this gap, I chose to seek out those high school coaches who were engaged in this practice and invite them to discuss their strategies with me. My plan involved interviewing said coaches, providing them with an opportunity to discuss how they interpret homonegativity in girls and women's sports, how they see it manifested on the teams they coach, and what they are doing to interrupt and eliminate it. As participation in the research was self-initiating, I was hopeful that the coaches who volunteered would find the topic of interest and be willing to speak openly about their experience with homonegativism on their teams.

I embarked on a process that involved throwing a wide net to find high school coaches who were interested and willing to discuss the topic. It was assumed that the coaches who responded positively to the invitation were sympathetic regarding this issue, and that those who were not interested or not sympathetic would choose not to respond. My recruitment strategy resulted in five interviews with high school coaches of girls and coed sports team. The

interviews provided rich and textured data, although it was not always the data that I expected. For example, a number of the participants revealed in the interviews that they did not specifically employ strategies to reduce or eliminate homonegativity. This puzzled me to a certain extent as the letter of invitation (see Appendix A) to participate in the research clearly invited them to 'discuss strategies that they were using, or considering using'. It became evident, however, as the interviews progressed, that most of the participants were at least interested in, and willing to discuss the topic of homonegativity in sports. Fortunately, the discussions were interesting, revealing and provided data that was multi-layered. It should also be noted that two of the participants coach coached teams. The discussion and the ensuing data analysis around homonegativity in sport was broadened to a certain extent in those cases to include males.

### **Use of interviews as a research strategy**

In developing my research plan, I took for granted that I would use a qualitative approach. I felt that qualitative research could capture the complex and nuanced relationship between coach and athlete, and the socially sensitive and highly politicized subject of sexual orientation, gendered meanings and homonegativism in girls' sports. Qualitative approaches focus research analysis on people's perceptions and it is important to understand perceptions to understand human behavior (Palys, 1997). Palys (1997) states: "What people *think* about the world influences how they *act* in it" (p. 35, emphasis in original). I believed that interviewing would create an opportunity to make knowledge,



thoughts, experience and strategies that have been marginalized and ignored in the dominant high school sport discourses visible. Through interviews I could gently lead the discussion, but also allow the coaches to respond as they wished. I was also prepared and willing to follow an unanticipated line of discussion occurring in the interview if it was relevant and revealing. I wanted to gain knowledge about the experience of coaches and as Kvale (1996) writes, "the qualitative research interview is a construction site of knowledge" (p. 42). My goal was to provide an opportunity that encouraged the participants to relate their experience with homonegativism on their teams in a manner that was nonrestrictive and rich in detail.

As previously mentioned, the athletic setting lends itself to a close relationship in which an athlete may be forthcoming with her coach regarding issues in her life (Griffin, 1994; Griffin, et al., 2002; Perrotti & Westheimer, 2001). I expected that the interview process would provide an opportunity to explore this complex and nuanced special relationship from the coaches' perspective and provide an avenue for the collection of information that could not be accessed through surveys, questionnaires or other means. Ultimately, I was greatly interested in how, and when, coaches actively reflected on the issue of homonegativity in sports and their thoughts, feelings and concerns regarding this issue. My motivation is reflective of the belief of Seidman (1998):

At the heart of interviewing research is an interest in other individuals' stories because they are of worth (p. 3).

Interviewing presents an opportunity to uncover the complex intersections of school environment, policy and coach and athlete relationships. Further, these

relationships can be examined within the context of the marginalization of the gay/lesbian athlete and the broader issue of homonegativism as it is expressed within the high school environment.

A much appreciated outcome of the interview process was the willingness of all the coaches to discuss his or her personal coaching practice, the philosophy that informs that practice and for many, his or her personal experience as an athlete. Finally, while it has been previously stated, it is important to reiterate that the stories that I relate are partial ones and are relayed through my analytical lens and personal interpretation. The excerpts I choose to use are reflective of my own personal interpretation of what is of importance in this study and the theoretical and analytical framework I am working within.

### **Research process**

I began the research with the completion of an application for behavioral ethical review with the University of British Columbia. Concurrently, a request to conduct research with coaches within the Vancouver School District was submitted to the Vancouver School Board (VSB). Included in the request to the VSB was a letter of initial contact and invitation to participate (Appendix A), letter of consent (Appendix B), and an outline of the interview goals and sample interview questions (Appendix C). Approval to approach schools with my work was received from the Vancouver School Board on May 26, 2003 (Appendix D). Accompanying the letter of approval was a list of Vancouver district high schools and corresponding contact information. As well, it was expressed in the letter that

committee members reviewing my request were very interested in learning the results. They wrote,

This is a topic that raises many concerns within the district and it would be valuable to be able to report your findings at one of our Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Questioning Youth (LGBTQ) Issues Advisory Committee meetings.<sup>3</sup>

This approval and expression of interest in the subject was encouraging as it indicated a concern with the issue of homophobia/homonegativism within the VSB, at least at the District Learning Services level. Certificate of approval from the UBC Behavioral Research Ethics Board was received on August 7, 2003. I was now free to approach the high schools and begin to recruit coaches for interviews.

### **The participants: Challenges of recruitment**

All high school athletic coaches in the Vancouver School District are volunteers, and therefore, are not paid for their coaching. While many are teachers, others are community members interested in coaching at the high school level. Some sports teams have a combination of teachers and community members coaching the teams. Sports programs range significantly as some schools have an abundant and extensive extracurricular sports program while others have limited teams and athletic programs dependent on student interest, teacher-coach interest, and facilities and resources available. For example, in most cases, sports teams only develop and run if a teacher or community

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<sup>3</sup> District Learning Services, V. Overgaard, Associate Superintendent Learning Services, VSB. Letter to Longpre, May, 2003

member expresses an interest in coaching and is prepared to volunteer their time.

The goal of the research project was to interview six to ten coaches of high school girls' sports teams. I felt that this number of interviews would give me an adequate amount of data to analyze in order to respond to the research questions and was within a reasonable scope of my project parameters. I was aware that homonegativity in sports is a sensitive and controversial issue and therefore developed a recruitment strategy that would initiate interest from those coaches who were sympathetic to the concerns raised by homonegative attitudes and behaviors and be willing to discuss them.

Coaches change from year to year, season to season, and as previously mentioned, some are teachers in the system, and some are community members. It is important to note that it was not easy to access interested coaches, as I was required to comply with VSB policy on conducting research in the school system. This policy, although not unreasonable and designed to protect VSB staff, volunteers and students, required me to navigate a hierarchy of personnel within the high school in the process of contacting the coaches.

To begin, on approval of my request to conduct research with coaches, I was directed by the VSB to make initial contact with the school principals, as they must approve contact with any staff members, volunteers or students for research purposes. Working within these parameters, and in conjunction with my goal of contacting as many coaches as possible, my research strategy was to initiate contact with the high school principals by letter (Appendix E) and request

the names of the coaches of the girls' sports teams in their school for that year. Due to the business of the first few weeks of school in September, these initial letters of contact were not sent out to the principals until the end of the second week of September. At that time, 18 letters were sent out, one to each public high school in the district. By the end of the first week of October seven schools had agreed to participate, four had declined, six had not responded and one principal was still considering involvement.

It became clear at this time that each principal agreeing to participate in the research project handled the request differently. Some replied directly to my response with the names of coaches while others passed the request on immediately to the school athletic director. The athletic director is responsible for coordinating all sports and athletics within the school. It is important to note that those principals who passed the request on to their athletic director did not communicate to me if they indicated to the athletic director *how* to proceed with the request. In other words, I am not aware if the athletic director had a *choice* in whether or not to provide me with the names of the school coaches, or if they were *directed to do so* by the principal. When I initially formulated my research plan and determined the path of initial contact, I was unaware of the existence of the athletic director in the sports program system in the schools. Because of this, I did not take the athletic directors into account when strategizing how to access the names of the coaches. While getting access to the coaches through one level (principals) was challenging enough, the addition of a second level (athletic director) only increased the risk of the invitations to coaches being halted,

misdirected, delayed or even lost. In hindsight, it is not clear if this 'unknown' level in the system hampered access to the coaches themselves. It can also be speculated that had the athletic directors also been invited to participate, perhaps they might have made good informants in the study.

In contrast, it is also important to note that I cannot be completely sure that none of the participants involved in the project were coerced to do so by their school athletic director or principal. Regardless of this fact, in all my communication with them, none of the study participants suggested to me that their participation in the research had been anything other than entirely voluntary.

When I received the names of the coaches from the principals or athletic directors', I prepared personal letters of invitation to the coaches named. I returned the letters to the school with attention to the principal or the athletic director, depending on who personally provided me with the names, requesting that the letters be delivered to the coaches directly. One school VP asked me to send 12 generic letters for coaches and he would deliver them to the coaches of the girls' sports teams. After another week I began follow up calls with those schools who had not responded, soliciting two more schools and sending out more personal letters of invitation. By the end of October nine schools had agreed to participate, four had declined and five had not responded. In total, 50 letters of invitation to coaches had been sent out to the schools. Within a few days of the first letters to coaches sent out (near the end of September) to mid November, five coaches, three female and two male, contacted me and agreed to be interviewed. Three contacted me by phone or by returning a form of interest

I had included in the letter of invitation. One coach contacted me directly after hearing of the research request from her principal prior to receiving a personal letter of invitation. One responding coach was sent a letter of invitation but never received it. Instead, through conversation about my research with a coaching colleague and mutual friend of ours, she offered her contact information, as she was interested in participating in the research.

I had no way of determining if the 'chain' of command within the school system hampered access to the coaches themselves, as the request went first to the principal and in many schools to the athletic director before names of the coaches were forwarded to me. In light of the fact that I had no choice but to follow the recruitment procedures required by the VSB, I had to first convince the principals that the research was valid, important and of interest to the VSB (this was assuming that at least some principals might need convincing). As a means to accomplishing this, at least in part, when I sent out the initial contact and invitation letter to each principal, I included a copy of the letter of approval from the VSB. This served two purposes. First, it confirmed to the principals that I had indeed received approval for the research, and second, it indicated to them the expressed support for this research by the VSB as was evidenced in the letter of approval for the research from District Learning Services. As was previously mentioned, the letter from District Learning Services stated this topic was of interest within the district and my findings would be of particular interest to the LGBTQ advisory committee. Despite the expressed interest in my research on this issue at the District Learning Services of the VSB level, I was disappointed

that only half of the principals of the 18 high schools in the district agreed to participate, thereby, providing their coaches with an opportunity to agree to be interviewed. The principals of the other half of the schools either declined to participate, or did not respond to the request at all. While a lack of willingness to be involved may be attributed to a variety of factors (other projects going on in the school seen as more pressing, lack of time and resources), it is possible to speculate that the issue of homonegativity in girls high school sports is not acknowledged or seen as problematic, a perspective that is certainly reflected in the literature.

### **Ethics and confidentiality**

An ethics review application was submitted and accepted by the University of British Columbia Ethics Review Committee before any research commenced. The identity of all student athletes discussed in this thesis is kept strictly confidential. As well, due to the fact that the disclosure of the identity of any coach interviewed might explicitly or implicitly identify a student/athlete, the identity of all coaches interviewed is also kept confidential. This is done through the use of pseudonyms. While confidentiality may be of importance in any form of research, it is of particular importance in this research study. This is due to the fact that homonegativity is a highly sensitive and controversial topic, and the inadvertent or non-consensual 'outing' of any study participant, student athlete or other school personnel, may place them at risk of victimization. While further understanding of the issue of homonegativism on high school girls' teams may



be instrumental in eliminating sexual orientation harassment, it is imperative that those subjects we wish to protect are not harmed in the research process.

Therefore, the study was conducted and the results were analyzed and recommendations made with great attention to confidentiality to protect those who participated.

### **The interviews**

All five interviews were conducted, in person, at the school where the coaches worked. Interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed<sup>4</sup>. The interviews ranged from approximately 40 – 75 minutes. Short sections of two interviews were not recorded due to technical problems with the tape recorder. In both cases, the sections lost were not crucial to the interviews so were not re-recorded.

In preparation for the formal interviews, I conducted a mock interview with a friend who had experience coaching high school girls' rugby. Early in the interview, she expressed that she had never experienced any evidence of homonegativism, overt or otherwise among the girls' she neither coached, nor had she ever raised the issue. Due to the insidious nature of homonegativity, and hegemonic beliefs reflecting gender role stereotyping in sport, I suspected it might be evidenced in this coach's practice, but she may not have recognized it as such. Wanting to experiment with my interviewing technique, and curious to see if I could find evidence of my suspicion, I continued the interview and asked

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<sup>4</sup> I have let the interviews stand as they are, without grammatical corrections, in order to preserve continuity and authenticity.

her a variety of questions. I probed into her coaching practice, the nature of the relationship with the girls she coached, and her attitudes and beliefs and the athletes surrounding gender in sport. The interview turned out to be quite revealing and exposed a number of homonegative accounts and gender biased beliefs that the interviewee had not recognized as such. I discussed this with her and she expressed interest in my interpretation and was generally in agreement. In retrospect, this mock interview and my experience in probing beyond superficial meanings, served to prepare me for the formal interviews.

In each of the formal interviews coaches were asked to describe in some detail the nature of their coaching experience and relationship with their players/athletes, and the discussions and actions taken with their players to reduce and/or eliminate homonegativism on their teams. I carefully chose questions that would increase conversation and create a climate for participants to answer openly and comfortably. Gubrium and Holstein (2002) describe this challenge:

The knack is to formulate questions and provide an atmosphere conducive to open and undistorted communication between interviewer and respondent (p. 13).

While I planned questions to lead the interview, the interviews were semi-structured, and the coaches interviewed were allowed to respond in their own manner and tell the story of their experience as they wished, diverting the conversation at times. My goal was to ensure that particular issues were covered as noted in the above questions, but a considerable amount of freedom was granted in the interview process. As the interview progressed, I asked a number

of non-scripted questions in order to probe deeper or ensure clarification. In some cases, I took the interview in new directions to pursue issues or declarations made by the participants.

A notable shift of direction in the interviews came with the early assertion from all five coaches that none of them had ever experienced any incidences or evidence of homonegativism on the girls' sports teams they currently coach or have coached in the past, nor did they specifically raise the issue with their athletes in any unsolicited way. As previously stated, I was puzzled by this as I expected them to speak readily about the nature of their experience with homonegativity, given they had responded to the invitation to participate as *having experience* with homonegativity on their teams. Thankfully, although I was unaware of it at the time, the similar assertion in the mock interview prepared me for this unexpected turn. When this event materialized within the formal interviews, I followed my previous strategy to keep the interviewee talking. I probed into the nature of their coaching practice, the relationship they have with their players/athletes, the particular culture and social complexities of the teams/sports they coach, the broader school environment and school policy as it relates to homophobia/homonegativism and their own personal experience and sense of identity as a coach and, for some, as past athletes. I was motivated to do this due to my previous experience in the mock interview and the wealth of information it revealed. While this proved a highly effective technique in the mock interview, I was acutely aware of the importance of not 'leading' the formal

interviews, but to gently uncover unrecognized or unacknowledged homonegativity *if* it was there.

As I reflected on the interviews in light of the event that most of the coaches were not recognizing some homonegative attitudes, gender biased beliefs and reflections of heteronormativity, I was reminded of the insidious nature of homonegativity and the powerful hegemonic beliefs it is embedded within. Although the coaches who volunteered to participate in the study were willing to speak about homonegativity, there was considerable evidence of subtle (but powerful) homonegativity, heteronormativity and gender role stereotyping in the coaching practice of many of the participants that was continuing to occur and going undetected. It is important to note that it was not my mandate to uncover and clarify for *them* where they were not recognizing gender and sexuality biased attitudes and behaviors in themselves or their athletes, or unknowingly (or unconsciously) reifying homonegativity or heteronormativity in their coaching practice. Rather, my goal was to reflect on the practice of these coaches in general and illuminate homonegativity, and the combating of it, in girls' sports in the broader structure of high school athletics.

### **The coaches**

The coaches I interviewed were a group of people who enjoy sport, and were interested in providing an opportunity for students to engage in athletics in a challenging, supportive and rewarding setting. Four of the five coaches discussed their own experience as athletes and how this had an impact on the

development and formation of their coaching practice and their desire to share that positive experience. During our interview, Allan put this most eloquently,

The sport that I coach is wrestling. It's been a part of my life for about 30 some odd years so it's one of those things that teachers automatically gravitate to, it's something they can share with their kids. High school is a natural fit for that kind of thing, where you get a chance to invite students to be part of your world, something that you really enjoy. (Allan, p. 1).

A willingness and desire to connect with students through sport and athletic participation became a common theme in the interviews. I enjoyed talking with all the participants and was struck by their sincerity, their committed level of coaching practice, and their care and fondness for the athletes with whom they engaged. This was reflective of the evidence of the importance of the coach/athlete relationship as powerful and influential in the lives of the young people they coach (Griffin, et al., 2002; Perrotti and Westheimer, 2001).

Of notable importance, two coaches identified themselves as gay. Karen used the term 'gay' and 'lesbian' interchangeably to self-identify and Kevin, self-identified as a gay man. Shortly after these coaches revealed their sexual identity to me, I revealed myself as a lesbian. While the interviews with both of these coaches continued along the discussion topics addressed in the other three interviews, an additional focus centered around their sensitivity as gay coaches, their personal sense of vulnerability, and their struggle with what they defined as the extent of their responsibility to 'come out' and to act as a 'role model' for their students/athletes. One other coach, Lisa, identified as straight and was aware prior to our interview that I was lesbian. This was due to the fact that we have a mutual friend (although she and I were not friends) and this information was

common knowledge between them. This knowledge between us created a more relaxed interview climate, at least for me, and, seemingly, for her as well. The other two coaches, Allan and Katarina, did not reveal their sexual identity and I did not reveal mine in the course of the interviews.

The expressed, unexpressed, known and unknown nature of the sexual orientations of the participants and I as researcher had an impact on how the interviews progressed, my comfort with the participants, how I interacted with the data and my perceived sense of success of each interview. This will be discussed in detail in a subsequent section in this chapter.

It should also be noted that the coaches were all in the same age range, approximately late 30's to early 40's. As well, Karen, Kevin and Lisa are White and Allan and Katarina are Chinese-Canadian. All are Canadian born. The topic of the race of the coaches was not raised in the interviews by any of the participants or myself.

The first coach I interviewed was Allan, a wrestling coach with a well-established career. Allan began his coaching practice by starting a wrestling program at a Vancouver high school. He changed schools and continued coaching in an already well-developed wrestling program and after changing schools a third time is now working at creating a wrestling program at his current school. He described his initial reluctance to coach at his current school as there was no program in place and as he described it, " you have to introduce a sport like wrestling, which is not a mainstream sport. You have to basically build a culture in wrestling," (Allan, p. 1). He did, however, commit to building that culture

and a program and currently coaches 12-15 students, five of whom are girls. He has seen an increase in girls' participation in wrestling and has witnessed no barriers to girls' participation. Allan described the closeness he has with his athletes and the specific nature of coaching an individual sport as opposed to a team sport.

The second coach interviewed was Karen, a PE teacher and former college and university basketball player with varied coaching experience at the college and university level. She has been teaching and coaching basketball in the high school system for five years. She began her high school coaching practice at a Vancouver high school where she formerly taught, and after changing schools continues to coach in her current school. Karen discussed the warm, but professional relationship she shares with the athletes she coaches. She described the challenges she faces in negotiating the role of coach and teacher, particularly surrounding the issue of homophobia/homonegativism, as she is gay herself and stated this issue has personal relevance to her. She communicated how combating homonegativity drew attention to her own sexual orientation and placed her at possible risk for discrimination (her greatest concern was surrounding the beliefs and attitudes of students' parents).

When Karen revealed her sexual orientation in the interview she initially stated she was gay, but throughout the interview used the terms gay and lesbian to self-identify. They appeared to be the labels of identification she was most comfortable with. She did not self-identify to me as 'queer', nor did she use the term at all in our discussions. This implies some indication of her socio-political

stance surrounding her sexual orientation. This was further illuminated in her interview and will be discussed in the context of my theoretical framework in the data analysis chapters. She described her working environment as 'pretty open' and finds her teaching colleagues and administration in the school as generally supportive. This fact seemed to bolster her confidence about being 'out' as a lesbian within the school community. As previously mentioned, her greatest concern was that she might be discriminated against by students' parents if her sexual orientation was widely known. The fact that she felt very supported by her teaching colleagues and the school administration seemed to reinforce her perceived ability to withstand this should it arise.

The third coach interviewed was Kevin. Also a PE teacher, Kevin has been coaching both girls' and boys' volleyball and basketball for about 15 years, predominately at the school where he is currently teaching. With a long history as an athlete himself, Kevin also described a unique relationship with his athletes and discussed the challenges of negotiating his role as coach with his role as teacher. He talked about the nature of those roles and his caution in maintaining boundaries with his student athletes in light of the close relationship that develops. It was after some discussion in the interview surrounding the topic of homonegative attitudes and behaviors that he disclosed to me that he is a gay man. He also did not use the term 'queer' at any point during the interview to refer to himself or any other non-heterosexual. His challenge in confronting homophobia/homonegativism was similar to Karen's experience to some extent in that he had explicitly expressed that he had a personal investment in this issue



and had experienced homonegativity himself growing up as a closeted gay athlete. While at this stage in his life and career he is not closeted among his colleagues (but not overtly out either), he is not 'out' within the student body. He did suggest, however, that his sexual orientation was likely suspected by many of the students and athletes, and he declared he was reasonably comfortable with this. He also plays on a variety of community sports teams and expressed that while his sexual orientation is common knowledge among his fellow athletes he has not experienced any discrimination.

The fourth coach interviewed was Lisa. Lisa has an extensive history both playing and coaching girls' rugby. She began her high school coaching career at a Vancouver high school where she started the first high school girls' rugby team in Vancouver. During that time she was a community coach, as she had not begun teaching yet. A few years later, as a high school teacher she began coaching extensively at the school where she now teaches. She has now been coaching and teaching for five years, and although she continues to play rugby herself and coach it, she also coaches girls' field hockey and girls' basketball. Lisa enjoys an amicable relationship with her players, and sees athletes she formerly coached in high school, now playing in the same rugby league she plays in. She also described the challenges she has faced in carving out a place for girls to play rugby in the high school athletic system. While she has come up against many obstacles she has persisted, as she has a great love for the sport and student interest is high.

Katarina was the final coach interviewed. Katarina's coached co-ed teams, namely, badminton in the past and a swim team in her current school. This year her combined junior and senior swim team consists of 15 girls and one boy. She also expressed interest in sponsoring or coaching the tennis team in the spring. Katarina characterized the relationship she shares with her players as close, and discussed her challenges in maintaining appropriate boundaries with her athletes back in the classroom setting. Katarina's coaching style reflected an equal focus on teaching athletic skills, and emphasizing athletic ethics in commitment to training and to the team, team spirit and school pride.

### **Data analysis**

I used a number of different approaches to analyze the data from the interviews. The most effective was reading the transcripts over and over, looking for repetitive themes/phrases/words. I used colored hi-lighters to identify common and divergent themes and to make connections between issues (Kirby and McKenna, 1989). I made numerous notes in the margins and used tabs to easily find the reoccurring topics and themes expressed in each transcript. I drew a large flow chart to visually represent and summarize the expressed views, positions and experiences of the participants. A second chart summarized themes and diagramed links between them. My analysis of what the central issues and themes were changed a number of times, and as I spent more and more time reading, considering, and pondering the data, my analysis deepened and became more complex.

When I began to write, I found myself struggling to analyze the themes and hesitating to interpret the words of the participants. It seemed arrogant to do so, as if I was asserting some greater knowledge and understanding than the participants themselves regarding their own lived experience. With some academic direction and encouragement, I began to synthesize and analyze the data with more confidence. I also pulled back a little from the individual statements made by the participants and applied a broader analysis of the systemic issues revealed, rather than focusing on what first appeared to be attitudes and values of the individual participants, that were different from my own. This proved highly effective and ultimately created much more widely useable research. A broader, systemic analysis also served to avoid being overly critical of the participants as individuals, as I was well aware of the often-challenging circumstances under which they teach and coach.

### **My position in the research**

As a feminist, athlete, lesbian, and sociology of sport instructor, I am well-informed regarding the influential role coaches play in the lives of female (and male) athletes, and subsequently the power of their position to affect the attitudes, values and behavior of the athletes they coach. As a lesbian/feminist athlete I am also painfully aware of the silence that surrounds homonegativity in female sports and the unwillingness of many athletes, coaches, sponsors, promoters, and administrators to acknowledge the extent of it, or the irreparable damage it causes.

Because of this background and personal experience I was drawn to research that might illuminate where homonegativity was acknowledged and confronted. Experiencing the silence, invisibility and erasure as a lesbian and an athlete, I wanted to use my privileged opportunity as a researcher to possibly effect some degree of change in the sport system. I chose to focus my research on coaches as I think they have much to say, and are highly influential and powerful (as they were in my experience as an athlete). Through casual conversation with a number of coaches at a variety of levels, I suspected there were coaches in the high school system who were aware of the significant damage homonegativity causes in female sport and were actively doing something to change it.

I have also found that talking to other female athletes (non-heterosexual, queer, lesbian, heterosexual), about the systemic and divisive nature of homonegativity, gender role stereotypes, heteronormativity and sexism in female sport, has helped me work through it, understand and theorize it, and ultimately devise strategies to combat it. It was because of this that I chose a qualitative research method that provided an opportunity for the participants to 'talk' about their experience and for me to 'hear' it in their own words. It also provided me with an opportunity to actively engage in the subject matter with them and clarify their responses to my questions. This method proved to be a satisfying process for me and I hope for the participants as well.

As I conducted the interviews I found that I 'connected' with a number of the participants on different levels, and to varying degrees, sharing much with

some and very little with others. In particular, I found the interviews with Karen and Kevin to be the most 'personally' interesting as we had much in common. Aside from the fact that we are all non-heterosexual, White, Canadian born, and grew up gay in the sport system, they are both physical education teachers and although I never taught in the school system, my undergraduate degree is in physical education and I currently teach sociology of sport at UBC. I found our conversations often took on a very personal and almost intimate tone. For example, Karen and I related to each other as lesbians and athletes, and as instructors in the broader education system. I felt a bond of 'known experience' between us to some extent, and it was evident that she did as well. Our related and similar experiences seemed to open up space for discussion and increase her willingness to share her experience. This was evidenced by the fact that following her statement that she was a lesbian and my subsequent disclosure that I was also a lesbian, she seemed much more forthcoming and open. For instance, after relating some experience or concern surrounding being a gay/lesbian teacher/coach, she would often say "you know?" or "you know what I mean?" implying that I could relate to her experience. It is important to state however, that although Karen and I had many similar experiences as lesbians and lesbian athletes some of our views on lesbian identity and politics were disparate.

A level of personal familiarity was also evident in the interview with Kevin following our disclosure to each other that we were gay. Although Kevin and I had varied experiences due to the fact that he is male and I am female, we had

significant overlap in our experience with the pervasive silence and insidious nature of homonegativity in sport and our response to it. I also found that Kevin's socio-political view of non-heterosexuality was more closely related to mine in relation to any of the other participants.

In contrast, I found the other participants and I had less in common (to varying degrees) and I did not feel the same affiliation with them as I did with Kevin and Karen. Regardless of my sense of affiliation or in-common experiences with the participants, I frequently found the attitudes, views, understandings and beliefs of some of the participants on certain topics considerably different from my own and in some cases quite frustrating. This challenged me considerably when analyzing the data and I was reminded of my ethical responsibility to be fair and respectful to participants I don't agree with. Regardless of my personal interpretation of their views and beliefs surrounding the topics discussed, they have something to contribute to our further understanding.

While I stated that the interviews with Kevin and Karen were of personal interest to me, they were all of academic interest. In general I can state that I did not dislike any of the participants. I did not agree with the views or strategies of all of them, and was frustrated in some instances by their lack of understanding and recognition of homonegativity in their coaching practice, but I did respect them all and appreciated their efforts as coaches and their genuine caring attitudes towards the athletes. Admittedly, I initially felt some interviews were more 'successful' than others, but after interacting with the data and pulling back

to view and analyze it from a more systemic perspective, I realized all the interviews provided rich, textured and interesting data. This data also offered considerable opportunity for analysis, theorizing and a basis on which to make recommendations for ways in which coaches can reduce and effectively eradicate homonegativity in girls and women's high school sport, and how the broader school system can support them in doing so.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Coaching and Homonegativity: Divergent and Convergent Perspectives**

In this chapter, and the next, I turn to the interviews, examining themes that emerged in discussion with the study participants. I analyze excerpts where participants describe their coaching practice and the unique nature of the coach-athlete relationship, their understanding of homonegativism and how they perceive it in relation to their coaching practice in a high school setting, and finally, the degree of inclusivity in the school climate in which they work and coach in. My goal in analyzing the data is to organize into recurring themes the thoughts, opinions, perceptions, and experiences of the participants regarding homonegativity in their coaching practice. Concurrently, I utilize the discussions with the participants as a means to apply a broad analysis of the issue of homonegativity in girls' sports, in the social and political context of high school athletics. My ultimate goal is to illuminate experiences, perceptions and coaching practices that have not previously been recorded, and in doing so, fill gaps in the existing literature on homonegativity in high school girls' sports, and how coaches, perceive, and possibly disrupt and eliminate it.

A number of key themes that emerged from the interviews, centre on the participants' views on athletics, including their own athletic experiences in their youth, their role as teacher and coach and the close relationship with their athletes. The participants also discussed homonegativism in the school system and where they see it among the student body, staff, and administration and their



strategies for confronting it. The interviews with the two coaches self identified as gay/lesbian included in depth discussions regarding personal conflicts and concerns about coming out to their students and the athletes they coach, how that affects their relationships with them, and how they are viewed by them (and possibly their students'/athletes' parents); and consequently, how this affects their coaching and teaching practice. The complex and unique issues raised in these two interviews will be discussed in more detail in chapter five.

### **Negotiating the coach - athlete/teacher – student relationship**

At the onset of each interview, I asked the coaches to describe their coaching experience, and elaborate on the nature of their relationship with the athletes with whom they work. Specifically, I wanted to investigate the nature of the coach-athlete relationship and discover if it differs, and if so how, from the teacher-student relationship. I wanted to know what impact their dual teaching and coaching role had on their practice and if their role as coach in the school presented any benefits or pitfalls. My interest in this was based on the literature (Griffin, et al., 2002; Perrotti and Westheimer, 2001) that describes the coach-athlete relationship as closer than the teacher-student relationship, and how that might impact the degree of discussion (between coach-athlete) surrounding certain issues such as sexual orientation, and homonegativity.

Each participant described a closer relationship with the athletes they worked with as a coach, than the relationship they experienced with students as

a teacher. Allan described this special connection as a 'bond' within the context of coaching athletes in the sport of wrestling:

In an individual sport you go through some very difficult times with students. They lose and win and they share those emotions with you, so the bond becomes even stronger. And it's not a bond of dependency or anything like that...it's like almost an invitation; bringing someone into your home and showing them all the great things that happen in this sport. (Allan, p. 1)

Lisa described how her coaching practice changed over time and developed into the unique coach-athlete relationship she now enjoys:

I really eased into it over the years and in the beginning I was probably not quite so intimate. I guess I played more of a teacher role than a coaching role and in the past few years I've found I've really gotten to know the girls well. Before I'd keep a lot of things in my life separate....[Now I play] more of a counseling role as well as a coaching role (Lisa, p. 1).

Katarina also described a 'close rapport' with her athletes that was not evident in the relationship she shared with her students. She also elaborated on how the close relationship with her athletes manifests itself:

I have students asking me personal questions and maybe they wouldn't have done so if I was just their teacher, but [they do] because they have that extra time [with me as their coach] (Katarina, p. 7).

Allan, Lisa and Katarina all describe an affiliation with their athletes that lends itself to a closer connection based on their mutual interest in sports and extra time spent together above and beyond the classroom. The terms 'close rapport', 'bond' and 'intimate' imply an intensity between these coaches and their athletes, that while carefully managed (as Lisa points out), appears to create a connection that both coach and athlete enjoy.

Katarina and Karen described the special nature of the coach-athlete relationship, and the impact of the smaller coach-athlete ratio in comparison to

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Katarina and Karen described the special nature of the coach-athlete relationship, and the impact of the smaller coach-athlete ratio in comparison to

the larger teacher-student ratio in the classroom. They also described the ways in which the extra-curricular sport setting shifts students' motivation, as they choose to be there, while they have no choice in classroom/academic attendance. Katarina describes these differences:

I definitely do see a difference between a coach and a player, versus a student and a teacher. As a teacher you are among several other students, like 30 in a class and whereas the team you're maybe down to 12....you have that difference, and then they want to be on the team for a purpose whereas in that classroom they may not want to be there.  
(Katarina, p. 2)

Karen also describes the significance of extra-curricular athletes' motivation and the resulting shift in relationship between athlete and coach:

You have a closer relationship because students choose to be there. I always like that atmosphere because it's not like the classroom setting, it's less sterile, you know you can get closer and you feel if kids have a little problem, they come to you and that sort of thing. (Karen, p. 1)

That 'shift' opens a (less sterile) space and an opportunity for athletes to approach coaches and discuss with them issues of a more personal nature. This may include issues of sexuality and sexual orientation. While it is of utmost importance to maintain appropriate boundaries, the coach can be seen as a profoundly influential figure in the athlete's life (Griffin, et al., 2002; Perrotti and Westheimer, 2001).

The nature of extra curricular sports team participation also creates a unique relationship as the coach is now acting as a volunteer and has significantly more power in the relationship than in the classroom. Karen describes this circumstance:

This is my volunteer time and if you're gonna talk, you're gone....I have that power in a coaching situation, where you don't have as much power

as a teacher....unless the principal kicks them out they're in your class. So....for them it's a privilege situation and so it's highly desirable that they stay. (Karen, p. 10).

Katarina agrees with this view, stating: "you have to have them in your classroom, but you don't have to have them on your team" (Katarina, pg. 3).

Related to the elevated authority of the volunteer coach, Katarina also stated that students in her school are well aware of the privileged nature of extra curricular sports:

the kids respect coaches in that they know that teachers are putting in their own time so they are very grateful and they are very thankful that the school has the team and there's a teacher to sponsor it or coach it so they respond very well. (Katarina, pg. 2)

These circumstances award the coach significant personal power over the athletes they coach. This can have momentous implications for the non-heterosexual athlete. From this power-infused location, the coach has the authority, and opportunity, to significantly control athlete behavior which could include an intolerance of homonegative attitudes and behaviors. In the event an athlete does not comply with the team rules of conduct, the coach can cut him or her from the team. In this circumstance, the coach is in a position to create and reinforce an athletic setting that is non-discriminatory, respectful and safe for non-heterosexual athletes (Griffin, et al., 2002). Similarly, the authority of the coach may place a non-heterosexual player at considerable risk. If the coach feels or expresses homonegative attitudes and/or behaviors, the non-heterosexual athlete may be victimized and suffer discreet or overt homonegativity. This may be manifested in homonegative behaviors by teammates that go uninterrupted by the coach, or subtle or overt discriminatory

practices from the coach him or herself. In this circumstance, the non-heterosexual player is likely to fervently hide his or her sexual orientation to avoid being victimized.

Acknowledging the complexities of these relationships, the participants also elaborated on challenges in negotiating the balance between the teacher-student relationship and the coach-athlete relationship. Karen and Kevin described how they are required to set clear boundaries so that the relationship lines do not get blurred and professionalism is maintained:

I still keep that really professional that I'm still Miss [name] and they're the kids, you know what I mean? You don't want to break that professionalism. (Karen, p. 1)

In coaching as opposed to teaching you get more familiar, you take a greater risk....but there's more of a chance of...I would say being too familiar, or being in a situation where you might say something inappropriate. I try to make it really clear to my girls that we can be friendly but we're not friends. I do try to make that distinction between "I'm not your peer, I am your coach" and I think it is important to make that distinction (Kevin, p. 2).

In light of the previous discussions surrounding the close and unique nature of the relationship between coach and athlete, and the powerful and authoritative position the coach holds over the athlete, it becomes acutely important for the coach to be aware of, and maintain appropriate boundaries. It remains the coach's responsibility to manage and set the boundaries for a safe, suitable and stable relationship between coach and athletes.

Within the context of this close, power laden relationship, I was interested in investigating how the coaches might approach issues of gendered meanings, and discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation on the teams they

coach. There is very little written on the existence of homonegativity in high school (particularly female) athletics and even less on how, and if, coaches recognize and combat it. To address and explore this issue, I moved the interviews to discussions surrounding homonegativity in the school setting in general and then to athletics in particular.

### **Visibility of homonegativity and strategies for addressing it in the classroom and in the hallways**

I opened the discussion around homonegativity by simply asking the coaches what that term meant to them? What comes to mind when you hear the term homonegativity? The depth of understanding of the term 'homonegativity', and its implications and consequences varied considerably among the five coaches. These ranged from a limited, but common understanding, to a more in-depth understanding of the issue within the broader context of oppression and discriminatory attitudes and values based on difference. As stated earlier, previous to the study, none of the participants were familiar with the term homonegativity. They tended to base their answers to my question surrounding its meaning on their previous understanding of homophobia as an irrational fear of homosexuality. We discussed the similarities and differences between these two terms, and while we continued to use the term homonegativity throughout the interviews, we agreed there was enough overlap between the two terms to indicate a common understanding between us. While the responses to my query regarding the meaning and manifestations of homonegativity varied, there was a

common theme expressed: they all described verbal harassment by students, specifically name-calling that conveyed derogatory attitudes towards homosexuality.

Allan described homonegativism based on his experience as an athlete:

When I first started competing myself, when I was about 13, there was a certain sense... you have to wear what we used to call a monkey suit, a little string bikini almost, and unlike basketball players or football players who had these glamorous uniforms, the wrestlers went out almost, you know, 'bare bones'.... And so what happens is, a lot of the non-wrestlers, the people who don't really understand your sport will actually start pelting you with very negative... I'm not sure what you mean by homonegativism, but I have a feeling that it stems from this idea that we started getting into when I was a senior wrestler, talking about homophobia.... And basically, once you were in the sport, and you had a sense of security of what you did and what your accomplishments were, most wrestlers could let that roll off their backs, all that pelting of negativity (Allan, p. 2-3).

Allan's response led me to believe that he related homonegativity to questions of masculinity surrounding the 'little string bikini' worn in wrestling, in comparison to the 'glamorous uniforms' worn in well-established, masculine focused, power and performance sports such as basketball and football. He seemed to be describing an attitude among non-wrestlers (and perhaps wrestlers as well) that wrestling uniforms did not measure up in terms of appropriate expressions of masculinity. Based on this implication, I suspected Allan suffered anti-gay slurs (pelting of negativity) as a wrestler, because wrestling uniforms did not meet appropriate masculinity guidelines, and therefore the heterosexuality of wrestlers was suspect. In order to determine if my interpretation of his response was correct, and to further clarify his meaning, I asked him if he meant that some perceived wrestling as 'homo-erotic'?



Yes something like that, or having gender....(searching for words) (pause) you were not....(pause, searching for words) you like to run around...or roll around the mat with boys. As you became, you know, city champion or...you just gotta let it go, because you don't know anything about me, and it was almost a....we don't talk about it because we don't want to spend any energy because people don't understand. So even at an early age from grade 10, I think for most of us realized there was no reason to fight it, because they were just ignorant. We didn't have all that stuff in our vocabulary, [like] 'homophobia', we just dismissed it (Allan, p. 3)

Allan's second response confirmed my interpretation (not only did wrestlers wear 'string bikini's, but they also 'rolled around on the mat with boys') that the sexual orientation of wrestlers was suspect due to the fact that wrestling, and its uniform, did not fit with culturally approved notions of masculinity. And his response to homonegative attitudes and behaviors was to 'dismiss it...we didn't want to spend any time on it because people don't understand'.

While I was able to probe and discern his meaning, what stood out for me in this exchange was Allan's difficulty in *articulating* his *understanding* of the meaning surrounding homonegativism, in this case the use of anti-gay slurs or behaviors to monitor and reify masculinity and heterosexuality in male sports. Without a reasonable understanding of oppression, or adequate language to describe it, coaches are left with inadequate resources to understand, articulate and meaningfully deconstruct homonegativity, and its manifestations in sport, with students and athletes. It can also be speculated that the coaches' understandings and the complexities of homonegativity in sport exceed their language to articulate it. What was evident here, and repeated in a number of the interviews, was what I perceived as an inability or reluctance on the part of participants to discuss homonegativity, homosexuality, or even heterosexuality,

using explicit language and terms. I was acutely aware of varying levels of discomfort among the participants to use such terms as lesbian, gay, homosexual, queer, or even straight. As a complicated social issue, homonegativity is a difficult concept for many to understand, deconstruct and eliminate. Unless it is raised and discussed in an explicit and effective way, oppressive practices are likely to remain embedded in high school athletics.

Lisa also had some difficulty communicating her understanding of the term homonegativity. Her sensitivity to the issue, however, and the desire to understand it more clearly and reflect on her own coaching practice within this framework, was evident:

females being with females and males being with males in relationships.....homonegativity makes it sound like the things that are not so pleasant....Well it kind of puts me on guard a little bit because it makes me think "Oh, I wonder if I've been coaching and being"....and I've thought about that the last few days actually, if I bring in my own bias's into my coaching role, which I'm sure I do (Lisa, p. 2).

Lisa struggled to express her understanding of the term homonegativity, however, she was aware of the general meaning of the word/concept. More importantly, our discussion allowed a questioning and reflection of her *own* biases, attitudes and coaching practice in relation to homonegativity.

All the coaches, with the exception of Allan, recognized signs of homonegativity expressed in the hallways and classrooms of the school and named it as such. Possibly because he did not want to see it, did not recognize it, was denying it, or it really wasn't there, Allan declared that there were no signs of homonegativity in his school. In contrast, Katarina, Karen, Lisa and Kevin all described name-calling and anti-gays slurs expressed by students, such as

"gay", "fag", "lesbian", "homo" or "that's so gay". Their interpretation of this behavior was also very similar. Katarina stated: "they use [gay] very liberally and they don't think it's offensive to anyone....not to mean they're gay, but just to....analogous to being weird or different but not being gay" (p. 2-3). Karen suggested: "they use the word fag or lesbian or homo in a general sense, not even knowing whether those people are...but it doesn't mean that he's a fag, the kid doesn't mean that, it's just a derogatory threat to use that word" (p. 2). I was not surprised that the participants recognized homonegativity most predominantly as overt name-calling and the use of anti-gay slurs to convey or 'stand in for' profoundly negative, derogatory, and undesirable ways of being. These expressions are akin to calling poorly performing male athletes a bunch of 'girls' or 'women' to insult and degrade them. What did concern me, however, was that the participants did not seem to *recognize* or *acknowledge* this aspect of using this language, or its profound implications. In fact, some even seemed to excuse it as 'the kid didn't mean it'.

While Kevin's description of what he saw was similar, his interpretation of the behavior was more complex. As a PE teacher he 'hears' homonegativity manifesting itself in the gym and on the playing field. He states that:

What comes to mind right away is "that's so gay", that term....and to me that destroys anything gay. It essentially equates any stupid action, any sort of mishap or clumsiness, in sport it might be clumsiness, with being gay. And hence, anyone who is gay cannot perform well or cannot do athletics well (Kevin, p. 3).

Kevin revealed anti-gay slurs as not harmless remarks, but behavior that expresses insulting and depreciating attitudes regarding non-heterosexuality.

And while derogatory language is used generally to degrade and insult anyone, regardless of their sexual orientation, perceived or know, it is particularly hurtful for non-heterosexual students. In a study of the harassment and hatred non-heterosexual student experience in U.S. middle and high schools, Human Rights Watch (2001) interviewed 140 youth between the ages of 12 and 21. In a section on verbal harassment, one interviewee stated:

People do use the term 'gay' as an adjective to describe anybody stupid or crazy or not cool. It's degrading the whole term and what it represents....words hurt, a gay kid could be on the brink, ready to give up, and hears that word all the time (p. 35).

In the same section of the report it was stated:

The average student in Des Moines, Iowa, public schools hears an antigay comment every seven minutes, according to data gathered by students in a year-long study; teachers intervened only 3 percent of the time (p. 31).

If the students in the schools where the study participants taught were subjected to even a fraction of the anti-gay attitudes and behaviors the students in Des Moines experienced, the effect would be profound.

Of specific interest to me was how anti-gay slurs were handled by my participants. My next question focused on whether or not they were intervening when they witnessed this behavior. If they were intervening, I wanted to know how; was it done in a manner that takes time to deconstruct the issue as well as uncover the extensive derogatory nature of homonegativity and its broad social and political impact? When I asked the coaches this (Is it addressed?), they described how the derogatory language was tackled:

We talk about the language, and lots of schools that I've been at talk about it. But it's more the language offends us and that's what I would say

in a classroom setting, that I don't appreciate the language, it may offend people, so please don't use it (Karen, p. 3).

We address it and it's an ongoing issue actually in terms of coarse language and inappropriate language....and I wouldn't say that we've fully won the battle. I appreciate it here that we are very collective in what we want to achieve. We don't let it slide because if you let it slide then that gives them the opportunity to get away with it or get the wrong idea that it's okay (Katarina, p 4).

It is important to remain cognizant that to overly focus on name-calling problematizes *individual* behavior rather than tackling and deconstructing *systemic* discrimination. With this in mind, it is also necessary to acknowledge that language reflects attitudes and values, and addressing inappropriate language remains an important strategy for teachers. What Karen and Katarina described here was only a superficial addressing of the issue. *Why* is the language offensive? Katarina described addressing 'coarse language'. Were anti-gay slurs handled in the same manner as swearing, or were they deconstructed to reveal insidious and systemic discrimination of non-heterosexuals? I questioned them further on this, as I was beginning to wonder if what might be lacking is a discussion with teachers and coaches on the social underpinnings and basis of anti-gay slurs and their implications. In response, Katarina described how there are opportunities, or what she calls 'teachable moments' to unpack the issue, but other situations do not lend themselves to more in depth discussion. She outlines the challenges she faces:

it was really a teachable moment for them [her class] to actually form a discussion...."why do you use that terminology [gay] and what does it mean to you?" I was actually able to do that with them, but with other kids if it comes up it's just dealt with on a one to one level and simply give the reasons that it's not allowed and it's inappropriate and all they say is "Sorry" and that will be it (Katarina, p. 5).

It was encouraging that Katarina attempted to take the time to go below the surface of the issue and discuss the implications and meanings behind homonegative language and behavior. Unfortunately, what also became evident were the realities of teachers and coaches experiences in the school system and the little time, resources, training and appropriate environment that are available to them to deal with homonegativism in any depth.

In contrast, Kevin described how he takes every opportunity to express his intolerance of homonegative behavior and language. In his approach, he frames the discussion in a broader context of oppression, discrimination, and intolerance based on racial and national difference in order to help students understand the issue. He explains:

Every time I hear it I will correct the child and they don't get it, it's become so much part of their lexicon or their language. I try to explain to them, that's like when people used to say "you Jewed me, or you Welshed me", you know, the association there. And you try to explain and sometimes I've tried to explain that it's like 'plugging in'... somebody trips over the basketball, and you said, "well, that's so Chinese or that's so White". Would that be acceptable by your peers? Some of them get it but some of them really don't. "I don't mean any harm by it' they say. But for the gay athlete it is harmful (Kevin, p. 3).

I was interested in Kevin's efforts to apply a strategy of analogy to provide an opportunity for students to understand this issue in the more common discourse of racism. While it provided him with a framework that is well established, paralleling racism with homonegativity can be problematic. Kevin expressed his awareness of this and admitted to the imperfect fit between racism and homonegativity. For example, racial and ethnic differences are often more visually inscribed on the body, and persons of a particular ethnic or racial group

often live with, and have the support of, both family, and their broader racial community and culture (Sedgwick, 1990). The non-heterosexual student or athlete may be the only non-heterosexual in his or her family or community. Depending on how non-heterosexuality is viewed by his or her family and community, he or she may remain closeted, living in fear of being cast out from his or her family and community should their sexual orientation be known.

Further to the common, insidious name-calling, Karen also relayed her perception of how homonegativity might be evidenced on a high school girls sports team:

it [homonegativity] would mean if somebody came out, or a young girl showed signs of being a lesbian and then other girls were then being really negative and not being her friend because she was a lesbian....treating her differently or meanly because she was a lesbian (Karen, p. 2)

Karen's description here of homonegative behaviors expresses what might be overt attitudes and behaviors, but it also implies the subtle and subversive nature of homonegativity and how it may be manifested in the school sports setting. This is reflective of Pat Griffin's (2001) research on homophobia in girls' and women's school sports as evidenced by the ostracism of lesbian athletes by their heterosexual teammates. This is manifested in such behavior as the unwillingness of heterosexual teammates to room with lesbian athletes while on the road, or shower or change when they are in the locker room (Griffin, 2001; Harris, 2005). These behaviors serve to isolate a non-heterosexual (or perceived to be) athlete and communicate a clear message that they are not welcome.

While strategies such as addressing homonegative, or otherwise offensive language were used by the coaches/teachers I interviewed, Kevin and Katarina, both felt only student *behaviors* could be influenced or changed. They believed they had little control over the *values* the students possess. Kevin expresses this belief in describing his thoughts about a student who made a homonegative comment in his PE class:

I wasn't going to change [her] but I really felt like, that's fine I'm not going to change your values but you're going to shut up when you're in my class, you're not going to make comments like that (Kevin, p. 11)

Katarina also related a similar reading of the situation as a teacher and coach and how she perceived the willingness of students to change negative behavior:

No matter how much I preach about it being inappropriate or wrong or how much I blame, it may sink in and it may not. I think it definitely comes both ways and probably more so from teachers and parents or what not and less so from peers. But then definitely, I would say that in order for us to have an impact they have to also be thinking...they have to be receptive to care as well (Katarina, p. 10).

It was interesting that Katarina used such language as 'preach' and 'blame' to describe her method, although she seemed to acknowledge that these ways of approaching the issue with students had little impact. This speaks further to the responsibility of the broader school system to deconstruct, educate and provide a forum for students to discuss and better understand this issue in light of its social complexity. From this better informed and more possibly more compassionate position, students can then form their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

Karen and Kevin also discussed how homonegativism is handled in their (and other) schools through different strategies. Karen describes various



strategies used to establish a gay friendly environment and the positive effect it has:

I notice a lot of schools have the gay friendly rainbow and lots of teachers have opted to put that on their doors....And it's really nice, because the kids [that] are struggling with their own sexuality, they know they're coming into a class where the teacher may not know if the young child is gay or whatever, but the kid knows that the teacher is friendly to it. I mean kids can have parents that are gay, they can have brothers that are gay or relatives or friends or whatever. It's nice to know, because our schools have been so quiet, that people are friendly and they are not homophobic (Karen, p. 4).

Karen also discussed seminar days where counselors explore the issue of homophobia with students and teachers and Kevin described the 'GLAM – gay lesbian and transgendered club' at his current school. Strategies such as this serve to foster an environment of acceptance and celebration of diversity, and while they are limited to some extent in their acknowledgment of the diverse and 'fluid' nature of sexuality, there is an emphasis on decreasing the power of heteronormativity. In doing so, they also contribute to a reduction of invisibility and marginality for non-heterosexual students.

It was becoming apparent that a number of the coaches interviewed did not have the skills, resources or time available to them to confront and deconstruct homonegativity on any other than a superficial level. This may be due to more pressing issues in the school (class size, limited educational resources, incidences of racial and ethnic discrimination and violence) as identified by administration, teachers and students. I began to question what resources could be made available and what school climate changes need to

occur in order to provide teachers and coaches with the tools necessary to tackle homonegativity in an effective manner.

After discussing their role as teacher and coach, the nature of their relationship with their athletes, and their understanding and recognition of homonegativity in the schools, I moved the interview to specific issues surrounding the participants' coaching practice. Our discussion soon revealed that their previous experience as athletes has had significant impact on the development of their coaching philosophy and practice.

### **From athlete to coach**

Throughout the interviews, the coaches frequently reflected on their own personal history as athletes and their experience with homonegative attitudes, behaviors and belief systems. In this section I analyze how previous experience as athletes affected the coaches and shaped and coloured their perception of, and response and reaction to, homonegativity in their coaching practice. Specifically, I highlight circumstances where homonegativism was recognized and identified, as well as manifestations of gendered, sexist, heterosexist or homonegative behavior that went unrecognized as such by study participants.

In a previous section I described Allan's experience as a young wrestler and his description of remarks made by non-wrestlers. In his account, he implied non-wrestlers raised speculation about his masculinity/sexuality due to the tight and revealing outfit wrestlers wear to compete. His strategy in response to this negative behavior was to ignore such comments and dismiss them. Allan

maintains this same attitude in his role as a coach and assumes that his athletes think and feel the same. He states:

Most wrestlers have developed a tough skin, they let it roll off their backs. So, in terms of the....we don't have it as part of the discussion that goes on because it means nothing to them, so they don't bring it up in our discussions (Allan, p. 4).

Allan's assumption is that the athletes do not bring it up because it is not important to them, or has no direct relevance to them. This is reflective of the silence that surrounds homonegativity in sports and the marginalizing and erasing of non-heterosexual athletes (Cahn, 1994b; Griffin, 1992; Hall, 1996). Anti-gay comments may in fact concern the athletes in question, but they may not feel comfortable or safe voicing their concern or displeasure with the derogatory nature of the accusations regarding their sexuality. This may be, in part, due to the manner in which a coach chooses to manage it. It is the coach who sets clear guidelines surrounding conduct and is responsible for the protection of his or her athletes. It is the coach's responsibility to ensure that negative and derogatory name-calling (by athletes and non-athletes) is addressed, deconstructed and made clear that it will not be tolerated (Blinde and Taub, 1992a). Allan's strategy to respond to negative assertions surrounding sexual orientation with silence, is reflective of a common and traditional method. He states:

I like to think of my role as not trying to explain myself or trying to rationalize to them what's going on because you can't change everyone's behavior, you can only change your own. So, if you can understand what other people are thinking, then it's much easier to either walk away from it or just ignore it.... Rather than fight it or waste energy trying to deal with the issues (Allan, p. 7).

Not surprisingly, Allan feels overwhelmed by the monumental, and what might seem hopeless, task of combating homonegative behavior. In light of the considerable amount of time it takes to run a team, in addition to the coaches role as a teacher, many coaches may choose to focus on their athletes and the sport itself, and ignore what they consider ignorant and irrelevant comments from others. The coach may also believe he or she is protecting his or her athletes by modeling what he or she might perceive as an effective self-preservation strategy, that is, ignoring the negative behavior. Unfortunately, responding to homonegativism with silence reifies the wide social sanctions of harm of non-heterosexual athletes (Human Rights Watch, 2001; Vealey, 1997). Not only are the recipients of anti-gay slurs receiving the message that they are not worthy of protection, but those who engage in acts of harassment get the message that they can get away with it (Human Rights Watch, 2001). As Sedgwick (1990) states: "silence is rendered as pointed and performative as speech" (p. 4). It further serves to reinforce the negative connotation of non-heterosexuality, or anything other than socially sanctioned actions, behaviors or attitudes that express heterosexuality (Cahn, 1994a; Griffin, 1998; Human Rights Watch, 2001; Perrotti and Westheimer, 2001).

In considering how her experience as an athlete has shaped her beliefs around homonegativity, Lisa described her youth playing the 'male' sanctioned sport of rugby, and becoming slowly aware that her sexuality was called into question because of the nature of her sports participation. She remembers that:

My parents thought I was gay for years because I didn't have a boyfriend and I was playing rugby at the university level....I played sports all the way

through high school....but they didn't have that reaction with any other sport, but when I started playing rugby that's the reaction they got (Lisa, p. 10).

While Lisa was unaware at the time of her parents concerns regarding her sexual orientation due to her involvement in rugby, as she gained more experience as a rugby player, she became aware of differences in sexual orientation among the players she was in contact with on a daily basis: "I had no friends that were gay until I played rugby and I don't remember asking them what they felt about the opposite sex" (Lisa, p. 11). Lisa's interpretation reflects some interesting misconceptions regarding non-heterosexuality. First, even though a non-heterosexual person may perceive a teammate, or coach to be open and non-homonegative, he or she might still be unwilling to openly declare themselves as non-heterosexual due to previous negative experiences and fear of victimization. It also raises questions regarding our assumptions about who is non-heterosexual and how they might self-identify or be identified by others.

Lisa also became aware of the homonegativity that was evident on the teams on which she was playing. She notes that: "With my own personal rugby experience, definitely I would say that we confronted that on a daily basis with teams I've played with and for" (Lisa, p. 2). Lisa's experience in dealing with homonegativity on a daily basis might be reflective of the sport in which she chose to participate. Rugby is socially perceived and constructed as a male dominated and highly masculinized sport, due, in part, to the fact that it is collision oriented and is characterized by a high degree of physical aggression (Broad, 2001; Caudwell, 1999). Women's participation in rugby presents a

particularly acute threat to the masculine centred identity of sports, and therefore draws high criticism and pointed accusations regarding the sexuality of female rugby players (Broad, 2001; Caudwell, 1999). Lisa went on to describe how she has handled being confronted with homonegativism as a player and how she would use the same tactics as a coach:

I think if something had arisen where there was a situation where a female that I coached had used language that was inappropriate or said something inappropriately I think then it would have been raised, because I know I've raised points like that when I've been part of a team and people have said, "oh, we're playing a group of lesbians", or something then I will definitely step in and say, "wait a second here...." and we'd talk about it with our team but I think if it would have come up it probably would be something that we would need to address then (Lisa, p. 3).

While Lisa described her planned strategy as such, she later related a story that made it clear that it is not always so easy to address, or to be consistent in addressing, homonegativity whenever it arises:

There's a girl that I coached that's playing with the [club team I play on] now. I remember her making a reference just a while ago, to teams from Seattle looking like men out on the field, and making a joke about that. I remember her making fun of one of the Seattle teams. I don't even remember what my reaction was, I probably laughed and said, "Yeh...". Anyway, I think I probably just turned it around, I don't think I probably even addressed it (Lisa, p. 5).

It is imperative to consistently guard against sanctioning homonegativism at work and in personal lives, but it is hard work and presents a significant task. For example, what is first required is a thorough understanding of the social construction of gender, heteronormativity and the power structures that underlie and fortify homonegative attitudes and behaviors. Second, an individual must be well -versed in methods and approaches to effectively deconstruct and combat homonegativity when it is encountered. Without a varied and effective 'toolbox'

individuals are left with inadequate resources and skills to disrupt and combat homonegativity.

It is also important to remember that an individual who will not tolerate anti-gay slurs and other homonegative remarks, actions and attitudes, and who speaks out against it, place themselves at risk of being victimized themselves. The degree of risk incurred will vary according to the situation and the position of the person who speaks out (coach, teacher, student, athlete) and the degree of power, authority and respect they command (Human Rights Watch, 2001). With firm and consistent support from those with higher authority (school administration, coaching and athletic associations) this risk can be reduced and eventually eliminated.

### **Below the surface: Recognizing gendered meanings and homonegativism in sport**

I turn now to the gendered nature of both sport and homonegativity, specifically in the athletic environment in the school. How the participants' understood homonegativism and its implications, had significant impact on their ability to first *identify* homonegative attitudes and behavior and second, how they approached it within their coaching practice. As mentioned previously, when asked, all five coaches stated that each had never experienced any incidences or evidence of homonegativism on the girls' sports teams they currently coach or

have coached in the past<sup>5</sup>. Nor do they currently raise the issue with their athletes in any unsolicited way. This implies that not only was it not being addressed, but there was likely little or no discussion with athletes regarding the gendered, sexist and homonegative attitudes and beliefs that are deeply embedded in sport in North America. As the interviews unfolded, however, a number of interesting and significant themes emerged in relation to gendered meanings in sport and identified and unidentified manifestations of heterosexism and homonegativism.

First, two of the five coaches were currently coaching sports not traditionally played by females. Allan stated there was no hesitation by girls to join the coed wrestling team once they were invited to participate, but he did acknowledge gender differences in their approach to the sport and competition. He makes these observations:

They have already accepted the equal footing, the genders. As soon as you said girls are invited too, (snaps fingers), they're asked, they were coming out. There was no trepidation, no questioning, no nothing at all.... [but] girls tend to be much more reserved in terms of wanting to compete. They will wait until they have the skills, the proper tools, the proper mindset before they engage in competition (Allan, p. 2).

Allan also discussed the change in coaching climate when girls began to enter the sport and how wrestling presented some specific gendered concerns:

But we talked about when the girls started competing. What are we looking at, what kinds of things do we have to watch out for? We talked about eating disorders....because we are weight classed, and the boys really go after reducing their weight for those weigh-ins. We were afraid, as an Association, that it would be negative....it would be a way that a girl could rationalize being anorexic (Allan, p. 5)

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to note, however that, as evidenced through analysis in previous sections of this chapter, some participants were recognizing homonegativity in sport, most often as athletes themselves.



It is interesting that the practice of reducing weight for weigh-ins appeared to only be considered as a negative practice, and of concern to coaches, when girls entered the sport. Although it is practiced regularly, all dangerous and extreme practices of weight reduction to 'make weight' in wrestling are undesirable and of concern regardless of the gender of the athlete (Eitzen, 2003). It appears, however, that this practice by male athletes was viewed as asserting control over their bodies. The concern that female wrestlers might use the sport to 'rationalize being anorexic' can be read as a genuine and realistic concern. It can also be interpreted as a stereotyping of female athletes and a belief that they are controlled by their bodies and are more interested in weight loss and appearance, rather than aspects of the sport itself, such as competition, increased skill, and general enjoyment of physically challenging their bodies.

Allan also commented on the nature of his coaching practice, and how it needed to shift with the addition of female athletes to the team. He states:

There's another thing we started talking about when the girls were invited, "how do we run our practices?", the legalities, our liabilities as coaches, having co-ed sports such as a contact sport, how do we deal with it?.... because wrestling is one of those things where coaching is very hands on, we have to show the move, we have to show the technique with an actual body, right?....to make sure the students understand the body position, the weight transfer and all that kind of stuff. We talked about processes to follow for the first little while girls were being integrated into the sport (Allan, p. 6).

The recognition of gendered concerns regarding the actions and liabilities of the coach and how to resolve them, can be understood as an effort to lower the barriers to female participation in a sport such as wrestling, and make it more welcoming for them. It can also reveal the powerfully entrenched gendered

nature of all-male sport culture. For example, sometimes coaching practices (hands on technique training) and other team functions and culture (rooming together on the road, sexist and homonegative language and behavior) are required to shift and change when girls and women join a previously male only team. This is not always met with eagerness or even willingness by male athletes, and female athletes may be seen as 'invading' the male climate, changing the character of sport, and 'spoiling male fun' (Kidd, 1990). In actuality, the inclusion of girls and women may encourage and generate changes that should have been made long ago. For example, some practices such as 'hands on coaching' need to be handled with great care, *regardless* of the gender of the athlete. Other practices, such as sexist and homonegative language and behaviors should never be tolerated on either a single gender or coed team. A team and sporting climate that is respectful and considerate of all involved should find that only minor technical shifts in team functions (who rooms with who on the road) are required when a male only or female only team becomes coed.

While Allan was incorporating changes to his coaching practice it became apparent, however, that one of his skilled female wrestlers still thought of wrestling as a male sport and prized male's performance over female performance. He notes that:

when girls competed against girls and practiced with girls they learned girls' technique. So, by her [female wrestler he coached] saying, "I understand that I can win or lose 50/50 using girls' technique here, but if I go and practice with a boy and learn boys' technique, then I can be strong with boys technique and *do not have to fight using the girls' technique*....expand my repertoire. That was quite an eye opener for us (emphasis mine, Allan, p. 6).

While Allan is stating that girls and boys wrestle differently due to the nature of their size, strength, and height ratio, the underlying sentiment expressed by the female wrestler is that boys' technique is the standard by which girls' participation is measured and is clearly the more prized method of practicing and competing. This episode as an 'eye opener' for Allan, could be interpreted as revealing a gendered division between males and females he had not considered before.

Allan further expressed his perception regarding the place of women in the sport and alluded to the fact that they know their place as participants in male territory:

I think the girls feel more comfortable having the guys around in the sport....I think deep down inside they still realize it's a male sport, and they are now starting in on this new program (Allan, p. 6).

Allan did not elaborate on how or why he held this belief. It could be read as female wrestlers adopting a position as rookies, and taking an inferior or subordinate position on the team due to the long history of male dominance in wrestling. Allan also expressed a perception that the girls involved in wrestling had elevated their status by being involved in a male sport:

I think in this sport specifically, it's a brave venture for these girls. It's a sport that they've never really traditionally been involved with, so they are the pioneers....*they see themselves as someone above and beyond the regular norm of their group*....I think most of the other girls are envious because to be successful [in wrestling] you have had to have dedication and you had to be physically and mentally tough, and so I think girls, although they don't admit it, they still have maintained their friendships with kids that are non wrestlers, because I think they gain a certain respect from those girls (emphasis mine, Allan, p. 3).

Allan speculated that it was the unique quality of wrestling itself that elevated the status of female wrestlers. His remarks could, however, be interpreted another

way: that the girls were now seen as participating and competing 'above' their previous level of female sanctioned sports. One reading of this is that girls involved in wrestling were seen as respected by those who appreciate the fact that they had broken gender boundaries and expanded into territory that was previously inaccessible to them.

Unfortunately, what is often lacking in the culture of athletics is that the elevated status of male sport, or male participation in a specific sport, is not revealed or acknowledged as a discriminatory and unacceptable practice. For example, this is exemplified in the sport of figure skating and the elevated status of the male's singles competition over the female's singles competition. The focus of the male competition is on speed and jumping ability and less so on grace and aesthetics which is more of the focus of the female competition (Adams, 1998). If a male skater does not comply with the expectations of power and speed (read as masculine) and rather focuses on the aesthetics (read as feminine) of the sport, he is not awarded the same respect and may be harassed and degraded for 'lowering' his level of performance to participate more like a female (Adams, 1998). This is evidence of the belief that 'femaleness' in athletics and all it represents is devalued and seen as substandard.

Katarina also described the effort that has been made in her school to reduce barriers to participation and eliminate the stereotypes of so-called 'male' and 'female' school subjects, activities and sports:

I think the general pattern is to minimize that gender role or that stereotype that girls should be playing this or taking these courses. I think we are trying to diminish that, so now every student takes mechanics or woodwork or home economics and sewing (Katarina, p. 6).

It was, however, apparent that at least some sports were still regarded as male sports, and girls now participating in them on coed teams experienced a feeling of pride in playing and competing with males and also an elevation of their status. Katarina, who also coaches co-ed teams, related a story about a female athlete in her school (although not one she coached) who joined the male rugby team.

She states that:

Well, I think the girls take pride though too. The student that I was talking to you about, she takes pride in that she is a girl and she is on that [all male] team (Katarina, p. 12).

This can be interpreted as the lone female made to represent a 'wonder woman' stereotype. This stereotype dictates that only the most outstanding females (read: women who are most like the men) are able to make the team. In contrast, the argument can be made that girls participating in male dominated and sanctioned sports are reducing and eliminating barriers for females. I contend, however, that the thread of male superiority in sport is still uncontested and I suspect that attitude is not being sufficiently questioned and challenged (Coakley, 2001; Messner and Sabo, 1994). A continued reliance on the gendered division of sports with males dominating and females seen as second class athletes serves only to limit the opportunities for females. If women do venture into sporting territory seen as male owned, even though they may be allowed, or invited in, they are still viewed as alien and 'male-like', rather than female athletes in their own right.

While Allan and Katarina related success stories of female transition into male dominated sports, the athletes Lisa was coaching did not experience such a

smooth transition. This was evidenced by Lisa's challenge in securing support from the school system to start and develop an *all girls* rugby team. Lisa experienced a school climate that did support girls wanting to develop their own team and compete in a sport traditionally seen as male dominated. She remembers:

The backlash from outside was definitely there. First of all it's not a sanctioned sport with the Vancouver School Athletics Association....it's not considered a sport that's acceptable right now. They wouldn't support us financially going to provincials where they have supported other teams....the point is, it's just been really tough trying to bring [girls] rugby into the school system (Lisa, p. 7)

Lisa's experience of the lack of acceptance of her female athletes participating in a traditionally male sanctioned sport is in direct contrast to the perceptions and experiences of Allan and Katarina. This disparity may be, in part, a result of Lisa's previous experience with homonegativity as a rugby player and coach, and her increased *awareness* and *acknowledgement* of the more subtle manifestations of sexism in sport (ie. lack of financial support).

Female rugby players are prime examples of female athletes most likely to disrupt the delicate existence of societal permission for females to participate in athletics (Broad, 2001; Caudwell, 1999; Harris, 2005; Wright and Clarke, 1999; Young, 1997). Most specifically this 'rule of permission' asserts that girls are allowed to participate in sport as long as that participation stays within socially acceptable gender definitions and activities (Kolnes, 1995). In this case, female participation in a deeply masculinized sport such as rugby disregards the socially constructed notions of which sports are deemed appropriate for female participation. This practice breaches long held gendered boundaries of sports

involvement. In doing so, it draws strong protest from those who are attempting to police and maintain a masculinized sports territory, and encouragement, or even social permission to participate, is withheld. If participation in a male sanctioned sport is tolerated, it is commonly devalued, and seen as an inferior version of the "real" (read male) sport (Haig-Muir, 1998; Harris, 2005; Shakib & Dunbar, 2002).

What is perhaps most interesting in this scenario, is that the female wrestlers (at Allan's school) and the female rugby player (at Katarina's school) were *invited, allowed or asked to participate* on previously male only teams. While they experienced pride and elevated status in the school, the all-female rugby team (at Lisa's school) did not receive the same support. These young women did not *ask* to play with the males, or wait to be *invited or allowed* to play. Instead, they organized their own team on their own terms, thereby transgressing male territory and making claims on traditionally male only space. While female participation in male dominated sports could be interpreted as an improvement for female athletics and an example of gender equity, such inclusion does not automatically serve to dismantle the gendered borders of sport that allow females to participate on male terms. A thorough examination of the nature of female involvement in male dominated sports is required, to ensure that gendered and sexist attitudes and beliefs do not underscore or permeate their participation. It is essential that they be free to shape and design the nature and scope of their own sport experience, and in accordance, receive unconditional support of that experience.

When I asked Lisa what she saw as further barriers for the female rugby players she coached, she described lack of support by parents. Lisa elaborated on why she felt parents were less likely to allow their girls to play rugby:

I know there are times when girls will not be allowed to play rugby because their parents have said no, the girl wants to play [the boys in the family are playing] but the parents have said, "there's no way are we letting her play". Mostly that's around issues of injury. (Lisa, p. 2).

Lisa's comments reveal that these particular parents were more willing to risk injury for sons, but not for their daughters. Such a view communicates a gendered view of sport, positioning rugby as masculine and physical and therefore inappropriate for females. Later in the interview Lisa also alluded to a 'hidden' reason for parents protestations. She stated:

I think there are a lot of hidden concerns from parents that aren't voiced and they use the physical reason as a scapegoat a lot of times. I think they would prefer their daughter to be playing a more feminine sport (Lisa, p. 11).

Lisa did not specifically name homonegativity or the fear by parents that their daughters will be associating with lesbians, be accused of being lesbians or become lesbians, but her conjecture implies this. This argument can be made in light of the literature that documents the social deterrent of the lesbian label, which serves to fuel fears that girls' and women's participation in male sanctioned sports places their femininity and therefore their heterosexuality in question. (Blinde and Taube, 1992b; Griffin, 1992; Kolnes, 1995). The lack of explicit language on the part of both parents and coaches speaks to the hidden concerns that surround girls who are seen to be transgressing socially appropriate gender boundaries. It is within these common discourses that the



fear of lesbianism in sport resonates and is deafening in its silence. Without exposing and dismantling such practices as the use of the lesbian label to deter female participation, the fears surrounding non-heterosexuality and gendered divisions in sport are reified and continue to go unchallenged.

To further investigate the issue of silence that surrounds non-heterosexuality in sport, I asked Lisa if any of the athletes she has coached had ever come out to her. She stated:

I've since found out through the grapevine, because I play rugby, that there are girls that I've coached that are gay now, and they might have always been, I don't know (Lisa, p. 4).

This interpretation may be read as the reality of the secretive and protective nature of many young gay players and/or their own lack of awareness of their non-heterosexuality as one other than a socially sanctioned and assigned heterosexual one. An athlete may also be aware of their non-heterosexuality (or suspect it), but may not feel safe, confident or willing to explore or express it to her coach or others. He or she may also not feel it necessary to do so, or self-identifies in a manner that does not conveniently fit into the socially constructed and limited categories of sexual orientation. It might also be that coaches and teachers are making incorrect and narrow assumptions about what identifies an athlete as non-heterosexual.

A particularly revealing discussion in the interview with Lisa focused on the language and behavior her female athletes expressed regarding their appearance as rugby players. When discussing players' attitudes surrounding

sexual identity and orientation and how it might be expressed, Lisa and I had this exchange:

Lisa: That's something that I never actually brought up, but it is something that definitely the girls don't want to feel butchy, generally, they don't want to feel like they're big and strong...

Simone: Why do you say that?

Lisa: They've said that, that they enjoy the fact that they can look like females when they're not playing and then when they're playing they are playing hard core rugby and they love to tackle...

Simone: it's important for them to make that distinction?

Lisa: It is.

Simone: So, what's your impression of that, why do you suppose that is?

Lisa: I'm not sure. I think, well maybe upon looking at that and evaluating it, it could be around those issues.

Simone: Are they afraid that they might be accused of being too man like?

Lisa: Right, yeh, maybe because I know the high school girls really value being able to look good outside of rugby

Simone: When you say look good, do you mean look feminine?

Lisa: Feminine, yeh, good according to them. And I only say that because I remember going on longer trips and they'd get dressed up after, and do their hair and their makeup and wear really nice clothes and...

Simone: So that's interesting to me that they're very aware of their image.

Lisa: I've heard them say that too..."Oh they think that because we play rugby that we're 'butchy'", is the word they probably use...

Simone: So they don't say dykes or lesbian, they say 'butchy'....maybe that's a safer term?

Lisa: No. they don't say dykes or lesbians. Well, I know they get really frustrated with the idea of people not thinking girl's rugby is valuable. It is an ongoing frustration for them.

Simone: That's a gender equity issue for them too.

Lisa: Right. And now that you've mentioned that, I haven't noticed anything like that with basketball or field hockey. They want to dress up after, but I haven't noticed the clear distinction verbally.

Simone: About the issues of being butchy?

Lisa: Right. I don't see it in field hockey or basketball (Lisa p. 6-7).

This appeared to be an 'ah-ha moment' for Lisa. In this exchange, she began to recognize the subtleties of gendered and heterosexist meanings in sport and the power of the lesbian label to influence, shape and control female athletics (Griffin, 1998; Krane, 2001). While the athletes she described were concerned with dressing like socially acceptable girls off the court/field, the further along the masculine sport continuum they participated (ie. rugby) the more pressing the threat of accusation of non-femininity/non-heterosexuality became, and the more concentrated the strategies to fend it off. The basis of this behavior is the underlying message that athleticism and femininity are contradictory, and females have to go out of their way to show they can be athletic and be socially acceptable (Coakley, 2001; Krane, 2001; Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar & Kauer, 2004). What is also interesting is the athletes' use of the term 'butchy', which may be understood by the girls as synonymous to 'dyke' or 'lesbian'. It might also be surmised that the girls preferred the term butchy to dyke or lesbian, as perhaps it was perceived as less threatening and did not carry the same negative connotations as more sexually explicit terms.

My conversation with Katarina also revealed some unidentified gendered and sexist comments and use of terminology among the student body, which

reflected homonegative and heterosexist attitudes. When I began this portion of the discussion with Katarina she was very clear that she saw no derogatory behaviors regarding gender in her coaching practice:

So when we are practicing for badminton or swimming they [males and females] are very cooperative with one another, and I don't hear them use those terms [gay]. They talk about their abilities more so and as they direct it to character, it's not in terms of their sexual orientation. I'm not hearing any homonegative terms at all among my players or behaviors, or even subliminal messages (Katarina, p. 2).

Near the end of our interview, however, Katarina made an interesting statement. This arose when I asked her if there was anything else that came to mind that she would like to add. She responded:

I think when you asked me what comes up....*there are some students that may look at that [badminton] as a sissy sport, not as a female or a feminine sport but just sissy....*it doesn't take as much power or team play like volleyball does or soccer, so you're not running around as much, so then it doesn't have the popularity of the other sports right? ....*so even with that, there's no homonegativity in there either, even though badminton does maybe have that image, that stereotype* (Katarina, p. 9, emphasis mine).

What was most interesting about this exchange is that although Katarina expressed her belief that the use of the term 'sissy' had no gendered, sexist or homonegative meaning, something in our discussion caused her to bring it up. Something in the nature of the description and her understanding of this issue led her to believe that it was relevant to our conversation. If I had the chance again, I would pursue what she meant by 'sissy' if she did not see it as 'female or feminine'. From her description I speculate that it was related to the nature of power and performance sports (as masculine) and that badminton did not fall into that category.

In the next section I discuss specific strategies that the participants consider using to address homonegativity on the teams they coach, should they encounter it. This implies they are thinking about it, and acknowledging that it may be present.

### **Strategies to reduce homonegativism in sport**

The focus of the interviews with the coaches in this study was to uncover and record their strategies in reducing or eliminating homonegativism on the girls' high school sports teams they coach. While all five coaches stated they have never had to pointedly address homonegativity in their coaching, a number of the coaches did acknowledge that homonegative behaviors may be present in school sports and they are not privy to them. They also speculated on how they would handle homonegativity *if* they were to witness it or if it was raised by the athletes they coach.

Kevin and Lisa suggested that the locker rooms may be sites for discussion around sexuality and possibly expressions of homonegativity. Based on his experience as a young gay athlete in school, Kevin offers this insight:

I know when I was 13,14,15 there was a lot of homonegativism talked about in the change room, and outside the change room it would still come up which would drive someone that was gay even more into the closet....But the fact that guys talk about it openly round their coach outside the change room, tells me that they are talking about it even more in the change room (Kevin, p. 12).

Lisa suspected as well, that her students and athletes were having conversations, likely surrounding issues of sexuality, that she was not privy to. She states:

It would be interesting to be a bug on the wall in the locker room when they're changing to find out what the girls are actually saying to each other, and the types of things they are saying because I'm sure that *there's a lot that goes on that we don't pick up on* in terms of them talking about relationships (Lisa, pg. 12, emphasis mine).

Kevin echoes this opinion. He states:

With girls, I don't know, maybe there's an opportunity for them to talk, maybe in the change room some stuff is going on that I don't know (Kevin, p. 12).

Kevin and Lisa are acknowledging that much goes on that teachers and coaches do not hear or witness. For example, it has been well documented that due to the masculinizing nature of sport, male locker rooms are commonly sites for the expression of homonegative attitudes and behaviors (Coakley, 2001; Curry, 1991; Davison, 2000; Theberge, 2000). This certainly has been Kevin's experience. It is relatively unknown, however, what goes on in female locker rooms. This raises the question that if PE teachers and coaches are not in the locker rooms, what homonegative attitudes and behaviors might be present there, free from the watchful eye of school authority.

Also, acknowledging that homonegative attitudes and behaviors may be present in school sports, Karen discussed how she would handle addressing homonegativity on her team if it arose. She states:

I've never brought up anything in a coaching atmosphere. I've never had to... if it came up and someone was outed, or some girl said something or got caught I don't know, kissing another girl or something, then I would deal with it, but it has never come up and it never seemed to be an issue at all so I never felt it was (Karen, p. 3-4).

Allan states: "I've never actually done it [raised the issue] as a total team because I've never needed to" (Allan, p. 4). This was a common perception and

attitude of the coaches interviewed, however, Karen was also acutely aware of the complexities of this issue and how it must be handled with caution and sensitivity to protect those involved. She states:

It would really depend on the situation, because, it would be really tough if say some girls were picking on somebody. I wouldn't want to 'out' her if she didn't want to be out... that at 15 or 13 that would be really tough, because obviously it that got around the school it could be that nobody would really talk to her maybe (Karen, p. 5).

A situation such as this requires tools that unpack and deconstruct homonegativity, while protecting those students involved. Inadequate training places teachers and coaches at a disadvantage to deal with this issue with tact and sensitivity.

Kevin is comfortable dealing with anti-gay slurs or other anti-gay behaviors, as he is with many issues characterized by negative stereotypes, oppression and discrimination. He recounts an incidence when he confronted homonegative attitudes displayed by male athletes he coached in the past:

I raised it with a male team, because they were making frequent remarks about fags and about that being "so gay" and this was probably about 8-9-10 years ago. And I basically told them that they needed to understand that quite likely there was a member on their team that was gay and that they better get used to it. And just because there was that wouldn't mean that they were their heartthrob or anything like that, so what they were saying was pretty hurtful. And it was raised again with that team because one of them felt that, not a player on the team, but a classmate was interested in him, and my response was, "So what? Has he made an advance and if so have you declined that advance?" and then, "you should be flattered" was my point, "not only do you have the girls that are interested in you, but you have this young man", and he says "well that just bothers me" and that was the response. I said, "Well at the very least just think of it this way, "Now there are more women in the sea for you to date" (Kevin, p. 4-5).

In this account, his approach could be read as confronting homonegativity in a manner that is honest, forthright and non-defensive. Another reading might characterize this response as somewhat weak and as offering the student a way out by not naming his attitude and behavior as derogatory and offensive. For example, an incident such as this might better be approached head on as a form of bullying, and deconstructed as oppression and hatred, rather than turning the episode into pseudo-heterosexual dating trials and tribulations. It should not be overlooked or undervalued, however, that this incident occurred 8-10 years ago when there was even less support than there is now from the school system to address such behaviors. While the approach might have been more pointed, and revealed as bullying, Kevin was at the very least, recognizing and acknowledging homonegative attitudes, and was calling students on them rather than ignoring them and thereby serving to reify them.

Kevin goes on to discuss the considerable fear males feel by the 'threat' of non-heterosexuality and how it contravenes male hegemony and masculinity. There is significant evidence of this in the literature on men and sport. Theberge (2000) describes the significant social changes in North America in the last century which have "important implications for gender ideologies and their connections to sport" (p. 328). The growing recognition of the problem of violence against women, the willingness of the legal system to intervene in domestic violence and an increased intolerance of sexual harassment in the workplace have all served to contribute to the erosion of male social power (Kimmel, 1990; Theberge, 2000). Theberge draws a connection between these social changes



and issues of emphasized masculinity and male dominance in sport. She states: "These developments are the backdrop for the continued celebration in sport of a version of masculinity that is grounded in physical toughness and emphasizes gender difference and the denigration of women and gay men" (p. 328). Sports, and team sports in particular teach boys masculinity skills (Davison, 2000; Eder et al., 1995; Messner & Sabo, 1994). Sport also serves a variety of other social functions for men, including establishing status among other males, and reinforcing heterosexuality (Anderson, 1999; Davison, 2000; Griffin, 1998; Wellard, 2002).

In light of the literature that establishes sport as a site of reinforced masculinity and heterosexuality for males, the incident of homonegativity Kevin witnessed with the male athletes he coached, can be assumed to be typical, and reflective of the attitudes and beliefs held by many high school male athletes.

Based on this belief, Kevin speculates:

Generally if you took 10 guys, 8 of them would be upset by that [questioning their heterosexuality] or at least put on airs that that's upsetting. Whereas, if you took 10 girls and that another female was interested in them, 6 or 7 wouldn't really care, maybe a couple would be really upset about it but more than half the guys would be upset by that (Kevin, p. 13).

Kevin's speculation is supported in the literature on males in sport. I am, however, concerned this belief might underestimate the threat of the lesbian label and the barriers it creates for girls and women in sport. While females may not have as significant a negative response to the questioning of their sexuality within a derogatory context as males might, the studies and research on this subject (Blinde and Taub, 1992b; Griffin, 1998; Kauer, 2002) clearly illustrate the

limitations the derogatory use of the lesbian label imposes on sport participation for girls and women.

As noted previously, Lisa stated that she would like to think that she would address any homonegative behavior as it comes up and puts considerable thought into awareness of her biases and makes every effort to portray attitudes and behaviors that reflect acceptance of diversity. She explains:

I think there's a lot to say for subliminal messages and it's something that I find that I'm constantly trying to work on, portraying an image where I'm accepting of whatever sexual orientation a person has, and I am so it's not [forced]. I would like to think that I would call people on it if it verbally came out but there's nothing that I do specifically to address issues of sexual orientation within the coaching setting (Lisa, p. 12).

With her extensive background in playing sport with women of many sexual orientations, Lisa is well aware of the diversity present and does not ignore its existence. In her own coaching practice she states:

I've never coached any high school female who has come and said that, "I'm gay". I've never come across that in 5 years, *but I know it's there right*, but it's not something that's come out (Lisa, pg. 12, emphasis mine).

She knows it's there. As previously argued, a non-heterosexual athlete has good reason to stay closeted in an environment that may not support him or her. The coach is in an ideal situation to challenge this and create a safe, inclusive and non-discriminatory climate for athletic participation. Lisa suggests one factor that may contribute to a climate that is not open to discuss and confront homonegativity. As a student of counseling psychology she has become acutely aware of the value of listening and communication skills. When I asked her if the courses she has been taking help her coaching practice she states:

Yes, it definitely does, the listening skills and active listening and that type of thing....I don't think it's a strength, it has to be something that people learn and I don't think that you're learning that as part of your coaching role (Lisa, p. 3).

Allan also stated that skills around dealing with homonegativity are not taught or even discussed at coaching clinics. He states: "I don't think we've ever touched on things like homophobia" (Allan, p. 5).

Surprisingly, the lack of training for coaches on the subject of homonegativity is rarely raised or addressed in the literature on homonegativity and sport. One notable exception is in the writings of Pat Griffin. Griffin (1994) states: "Professional development programs for coaches rarely include information about homophobia in athletics" (p. 80). Griffin (1994, 1998, 2001) places significant emphasis on this issue, and strongly recommends providing such training to coaches, outlining extensive guidelines and suggestions as to how to go about it. Raising concerns of homonegativity in athletics with coaches, and as well providing them with the tools to recognize and combat it is essential in the fight to eliminate homonegativity in sport.

Coaches are well versed in teaching sound technical skills, how to run an efficient practice and how to build a winning team, but active listening skills and skills at dealing with controversial personal issues that may arise are not addressed. As the coaches in this study have stated, their relationship with their players is a close one. It is not misguided to speculate that personal issues such as homonegativity might not only be raised in this more intimate environment, but that it might be an *ideal* climate in which to challenge and confront it.

Unfortunately, many coaches are not taught these skills and as Kevin, Karen and Lisa in particular have articulated, the environment is not always favorable for teachers, coaches, and students to be out and feel supported, respected and safe. While this may vary in degree from school to school the evidence in these interviews point to a climate that is short on tolerance, and is sorely lacking in the celebration of diversity of sexual orientations.

### **Climates of acceptance and intolerance**

The five coaches interviewed perceived varying degrees of acceptance and support of non-heterosexuality by staff in the schools in which they teach and coach. Katarina described the efforts made in her school to reduce and eliminate sexism. She also described the efforts made by staff to confront homonegativity in the classrooms and in the hallways, as evidence by the zero-tolerance policy of homonegative language.

Karen felt personally supported by her colleagues and stated it was widely known to them that she is a lesbian. Karen states:

It's pretty open, yeh, because I am out to all the teachers and I don't feel any homophobia at all from any of the teachers (Karen, p. 4).

The principal is only second year, so this is only my first year with him as a teacher, so I think he 'knows' but I haven't officially come out to him but he's totally fine I think. I have no doubt that he's very open minded (Karen, p. 12).

While Karen did not confirm that this support has been tested as yet, she feels comfortable and supported in her work environment. Kevin also described a

school climate that was generally tolerant and made the effort to embrace and celebrate diversity. Kevin states:

Well, at this school certainly, the inclusion is really quite good for the most part, regardless of...be-it gender, be-it religion or be-it sexuality....certainly there's always going to be a negative aspect....but I think as far as not just tolerance, but in terms of celebrations, there is probably a lot more going on here, than in most situations (Kevin, p. 1).

Kevin expresses his thoughts about being out to his colleagues and how his attitude has changed over the period of his career:

To my colleagues, I don't hide it. I don't really announce it basically. I would say that's been a process for me with my colleagues, because I still believe that being in certain situations it could harm my career advancement, not that I'm really looking for any sort of career advancement. But when I was starting as a teacher I was much more guarded about that than I am now. Now I could care less about what my colleagues think in that regard (Kevin, p. 8).

As a well-seasoned teacher and coach Kevin is confident and secure in his sexuality and his position in the school system. If he had been interested in career advancement perhaps he would have continued to be guarded about his sexual orientation. It is also possible that the threat of being victimized as a gay man has, to some degree, affected his decision to not advance his career within the school hierarchy.

While Katarina, Karen and Kevin described support, and at the very least tolerance, Lisa's experience was quite different. She first describes the gendered nature of sport participation at her present school. She states:

The athletic department here is pretty 'old school' in terms of girls' sports and boys sports. Boys do wrestling and girls do dance, in terms of their curriculum in PE and it transfers over to the sports as well (Lisa, p. 8).

While this in itself is disappointing, Lisa further describes homonegative attitudes displayed by the staff she currently works with:

I know with the male PE staff, they'll quite often joke about, when females go up in sports they confront more and more women who are lesbians or gays....that's sort of what I mean by the old school as well....But one of the female staff members here plays field hockey and she's constantly talking about how it's really apparent [lesbians playing] in her field hockey league here in Vancouver, and it's negatively talked about, it's not talked about in a positive way (Lisa, p. 9).

Lisa first states that the male PE staff are 'old school' in their beliefs about appropriate sports for males and females, and also how they regard lesbians in sport. The label 'old school' implies that these beliefs are historical, not contemporary, and have, at least to some extent, been abandoned by younger men. Second, as female athletes reach a higher standing in sport, they appear to represent an increased threat to these men, which they counteract with the suggestion that they must be lesbians (Anderson, 1999; Haig-Muir, 1998). This attitude implies that these women must be aberrant in some way to reach such athletic excellence<sup>6</sup>. Making a joke of this further trivializes their accomplishments and serves to reduce their threat to male superiority in sport (Birrell and Theberge, 1994c).

Perhaps most disturbing in this account, is Lisa's report of the female staff member and athlete who expressed homonegative beliefs. In her research on women in sport, Griffin (1992) describes a variety of underlying interconnected

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<sup>6</sup> This belief is the foundation of the logic that underlies the only recently (1999) abandoned practice of compulsory gender verification testing for female athletes in the Olympics. The basis of this testing was to ensure that female athletes competing, were in fact biological females as indicated by their chromosomes (a flawed practice based on the belief that there are only two sexes – male and female). This sexist practice implied that females were limited in their capacity to excel at athletics and those who excelled beyond social expectations must prove that they are

beliefs that keep female athletes from challenging homonegativity. These include: the belief that the problem is lesbians in sport who call attention to themselves, that lesbians are bad role models, that being associated with lesbians is the worst thing that can happen in women's sport, and that women's sport can progress without dealing with homonegativity. Griffin (1992) suggests that "beliefs and associated responses in dealing with lesbians in sport have reinforced the power of the lesbian label to intimidate and control" (p. 258). Lisa was disturbed by these expressions and was also concerned these attitudes might be communicated to the students and athletes in the school. She sees it manifested in this manner:

It's not something that transfers directly verbally over to the kids. I can't imagine her ever saying that in front of students or players, but it's something that she will talk about with me and it's the same with the men, I can't imagine the men talking about that, but on the other hand, if that's what they're thinking subliminally...(Lisa, p. 10).

Negative attitudes and beliefs can poison a coach's ability to provide a positive, safe and inclusive environment for all athletes. It is interesting that these teachers so blatantly expressed their homonegative beliefs, at least to Lisa. If questioned on the derogatory nature of these comments it is quite possible (as has been my experience) that they would respond as many of their students would and claim they 'meant no harm' and be unaware of the true damaging nature of these attitudes. It is also possible that these teachers displayed this behavior in front of Lisa because she is heterosexual and perhaps they see her as an ally, on their side in the war against non-heterosexuality. It is questionable

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women, and not men cheating. Men have never been subjected to sex verification testing (Hall, 1996).

that these teachers might be so bold as to make derogatory and homonegative comments in front of known non-heterosexual teachers and coaches such as Karen and Kevin. This may account, at least in part, for Karen and Kevin's perceptions that their colleagues do not possess homonegative attitudes, when in fact they may be present, but that they are not privy to them. It is also possible that the leadership in each school varies significantly regarding their recognition and tolerance of homonegativity, with some actively working to unveil and eliminate it and others allowing it to go unchecked and unchallenged.

The exchanges and discussions outlined and analyzed in this chapter provide a textured account of the perceptions, experiences, attitudes and beliefs of the study participants. They reveal the complicated, troubled and many layered reality of the heterosexist and homonegative nature of girls' high school sports. What is most apparent in this analysis is the lack of systemic support in the school system to effectively challenge and eliminate homonegativity. Subsequently, there is no in depth discussion on issues of heteronormativity in high school sport particularly at the coaching level, nor does there appear to be adequate training for coaches to address the issue in an effective manner.

In the next chapter, I analyze the specific discussions with Karen and Kevin who reveal how their experiences as lesbian and gay teachers and coaches shape their teaching and coaching practice. Their experiences provide further illumination of the challenges of being non-heterosexual in the school system, and how their lives are affected in both personal and professional ways.



## **Chapter Five**

### **The View From the Closet: Challenges Faced by Non-Heterosexual Coaches**

In this chapter, I specifically focus on the conversations with Kevin and Karen who came out to me as gay early in their interviews. These discussions about homonegativity took on a decidedly personal tone, reflecting their own history as gay athletes and now as teachers and coaches. They struggle with the issue of coming out to students; that is, when is it safe, and/or appropriate to do so? Reflecting on their personal experiences of homonegativism and heterosexism, they also expressed concern for those students who are non-heterosexual or are perceived as non-heterosexual who may be targets for discrimination and derogatory treatment. They reflected on their conflicting feelings regarding their personal and professional responsibility to those students/athletes as gay teachers and coaches, how they may be expected by the broader non-heterosexual community to act as visible role models, and the protection of their privacy. They also discussed the perils they faced, their concerns regarding accusations of deviancy, and what they do to protect themselves within the system.

### **From gay athlete to gay teacher and coach**

Karen's experience with homonegativism as a college athlete had a personal context, and although she did not self identify as gay at the time, she was aware of her sensitivity to the issue. She remembers:

I was at [name of University] years ago [and] one of the girls came out and said she was in love with another girl, and the other girl was totally homophobic and freaked out and they all freaked out on her and.... I mean I came from a small town but I was really sympathetic but maybe it was my own internal.... 'knowing' but 'not knowing' (laughs) (Karen, p. 13)

Kevin also expressed what it was like growing up as a gay male athlete and the special hiding place sports afforded him due to the common stereotype that gay men do not engage in 'real' sports (Epstein, 1997). Griffin (1994) documents this experience:

Closeted high school gay male athletes are less likely to be identified because their athletic interests and talents are so contrary to popular images of gay men and are so consistent with traditional conceptions of heterosexual masculinity. In effect their athlete identity protects them from suspicions about their sexual orientation (p. 84).

Some non-heterosexual males may capitalize on this deeply entrenched social belief and actually pursue athletic interests as a strategy to fend off suspicions about their sexual orientation. A further analysis of this phenomenon reflects on the deeply heterosexist underpinnings of sport, and the risk of ostracism and derision a non-heterosexual male athlete faces in coming out to other males in athletics. In such a profoundly heterosexist and homonegative climate, it becomes necessary for non-heterosexual men to remain closeted and live a splintered life.

Kevin reflects on how living the life of a young gay athlete and effectively hiding his sexual orientation behind sport, has shaped and formed his practice of confronting homonegativism when he encounters it as a coach and a teacher. He notes:

Well the thing is that I have a vested interest in it, I am a gay man who teaches Phys. Ed., so I fly in the face of that stereotype to some degree. So, I've listened to that all my life and have been able to hide. I learned at a very young age to keep my mouth shut around those things as a male who is athletic and such... so I tried to have that rule, not just for me because I'm gay, but for any discrimination of any sort I would stop the class. But I think the civil rights movement as we know it does not entirely include gays yet as well, so it may be that this is the backlash, the pendulum will swing (Kevin, p. 7).

Early in his interview, Kevin made it clear that he objects to oppression and discrimination in any form and draws a number of parallels between homonegativism and discrimination based on race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, physical and mental disability. He suggests many of his students and athletes are well educated regarding racial and religious discrimination, but there are still forms of discrimination such as homonegativism that are seen as socially acceptable or at least tolerated. His practice of constantly confronting homonegativism places him in a precarious position of outing himself and risking becoming a target. He sees this reflected in the broader social structure. He states:

But, as a man who would go to a hockey game, the only two things.... I taught years of special education.... the only two things you can yell out when somebody makes a mistake or very, very sort of bonehead error.... you can yell out and call him a fucking retard or you can call him an f'ing faggot... and that's okay, nobody will say anything, and that will spew out of a person's mouth. So again, I find myself finding that balance between how much do I come out as an individual and how much do I not? (Kevin, p. 7).

The socially assigned derogatory nature of non-heterosexuality gives tremendous power to the naming of 'gay'. It is the very power of being named 'gay' that reinforces the closet and the power of naming. While Kevin's sexual orientation may not be so easily read on his body, due to the fact that his athletic participation and abilities afford him some measure of cover (Epstein, 1997; Griffin, 1994), displaying an intolerance of homonegative attitudes and behaviors may place him in a position of personal suspicion regarding his sexual orientation (Human Rights Watch, 2001). This continues to fortify the closet and the reluctance of non-heterosexuals to venture from it.

It is important not to assume that every non-heterosexual teacher or coach will develop and respond in a similar way to homonegativity when they encounter it (ie. recognize it and confront it). Nor should it be assumed that to effectively understand, deconstruct and interrupt homonegative beliefs or behaviors, one must be non-heterosexual. In the context of our discussion, however, Kevin and Karen articulated how their personal experience has contributed to their perception, understanding and response to homonegativism as teachers and coaches. They acknowledged the presence of the gay/non-heterosexual athlete and take that into consideration in their teaching and coaching practice. They are aware that an inclusive, non-discriminatory and homopositive climate, would allow both non-heterosexual athlete and coach to be out and be safe and comfortable doing so. Such an environment promotes and demands equitable treatment. In light of this understanding, the discussion in both interviews turned

to a significant dilemma for Karen and Kevin: Do they come out to their students/athletes?

### **The gay teacher/coach....in or out?**

Karen and Kevin put significant thought into this question based on the perceived attitudes of students and staff, the overall school climate, the nature of the opportunities raised for outing themselves and, most importantly, the risks and benefits for doing so. They have also struggled with what they feel might be seen as their personal and professional responsibility as a gay person to act as a positive and visible role model to their students and athletes. This has placed significant pressure on them as coaches and teachers and increases the complexity of their role. Karen and Kevin's discussion regarding coming out as 'gay' in opposition to 'heterosexual' is evidence of the deeply entrenched social binary categorization of homo/hetero that Butler (1990, 1993) and Sedgwick (1990) identify. The forms of sexual orientation choice are limited to either homosexual or heterosexual, and there is no acknowledgment of the fluid, diverse and unstable nature of sexuality and sexual orientation (Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990). In this circumstance, if Karen and Kevin are not seen as 'straight', then they must be 'gay'. Adhering to this social assignment of either heterosexual or homosexual, Karen describes the scenario that led to coming 'out' (as homosexual) to a few of her female students and the nature of the exchange:

And I struggled myself....do I come out to my students? I have this year actually come out to a couple of my students....well the kids are aware,

right....they know. I mean I don't outwardly 'look' gay, but I 'can', you know what I mean?. So I guess in my first year here some kids started asking questions and I sort of lied....and I didn't like that I lied, you know what I mean? But it was my first year here and I didn't feel comfortable coming out, but then I sat on it for a bit and then I said, "you know what, I'm not gonna lie"....and if it comes up I'm just gonna tell them, "yes I have a female partner". And that's what happened, two kids....we were walking out on the run and they asked me if I was gay....point blank, and that's what the other girls did in my first year and it was in front of my whole class and it was right at the end of the bell and they were all leaving and I didn't want to say, "oh, yes well I'm gay". So [this time] when they asked me I said "yes I do have a female partner", and they said, "oh, that's cool Miss [name]".... And one of the kids said, "well, I'm bisexual", and I said "oh, okay" and then the other kid said, "yeh, I'm not. I hate it because I have less to choose from" and they were just really funny and kind of cute. So far not one kid has come up to me and called me a lesbo or anything like that, and I haven't noticed any change in their behaviour, whatsoever (Karen, p. 5).

This exchange occurred five to six weeks prior to our interview and at the time of our discussion Karen had experienced no ill effects from outing herself. She suggests "the kids are aware; they know", and these students appeared to be looking for confirmation of their suspicions. The exchange appeared to relieve unspoken tension (at least for Karen), and opened up dialogue for the students. It is not surprising Karen waited until what she judged to be the right moment to come out, one in which she felt safe, comfortable and in control of the situation. She was very pleased with the response from the students and expressed in her telling of this exchange a decided relief at coming clean. It was clear that she felt she was withholding the nature of her sexual orientation from her students and this made her uncomfortable. This particular circumstance felt right and she was able to be herself and communicate an aspect of her life she felt she had been hiding.

It is interesting, however, that even though Karen was asked directly by the students "are you gay?" she did not actually state she is gay or a lesbian, but that she has a female partner. This exchange is reflective of the avoidance of explicit and specific language that identifies non-heterosexuals, as bisexual, gay, lesbian, transgendered, queer or questioning. It is not unusual for gays or lesbians, for example, to use language that identifies them as non-heterosexual while distancing themselves from such labels as lesbian, which might carry negative connotations (Fusco, 1998; Griffin, 1998). While this may be read as a strategy to avoid social derision, it is also likely that many non-heterosexuals themselves internalize and adopt the negative connotations of non-heterosexuality as a result of living in a homonegative society (Krane, 1996). The example of Karen stating she has a female partner can be read as using softer, safer language that conveys the message she wants without the risk of being labeled a 'lesbian' or a 'dyke'. Unfortunately, if the deprecating connotations of these terms are not challenged they are only reinforced. Karen expressed the derogatory connotation of the term dyke and the image it conjures when describing how *she* feels she might be perceived by concerned parents and how she would handle the situation. She speculates:

So I would think that if something came up I would just schedule a meeting and try and tell that person that I have no interest....that I'm actually married or committed to one person and I have no issues with young girls or, I'm a professional person....You know I think once they met me and saw that I'm not this big hairy ugly dyke or something like that, that they would maybe be okay with it....I don't know....(Karen, p. 12).

It appears important to Karen to distance herself from the image of the 'big hairy ugly dyke', the proverbial image of the 'monster', the 'sexual deviant'. Griffin

(1998) describes such statements as “defensive reactions to the lesbian boogeywoman image ” (p. 89). This echoes Sedgwick's (1990) theorizing of ‘heterosexual panic’ which manifests itself as heterosexuality's efforts to demonize homosexuality in an attempt to maintain its own position as central, natural and ideal. There is strong evidence and a long history to support that such concerns by non-heterosexuals are well founded (Lewskyj, 1997). For example, in his research Kinsman (1996, 2000) documents how the social construction of lesbian and gay sexualities as ‘abnormal’ and ‘deviant’ was used from 1950 to 1970 in the Canadian military to identify gays and lesbians as a distinct national security threat. This policy determined that gays and lesbians were unreliable because of a purported ‘character weakness’. Griffin (1998) also documents an “association of lesbians with uncontrolled, predatory hypersexuality” (p. 58). Karen is highly cognizant of the parents of her students, and their opinion of her. It is, in fact, the parents she is most aware of when ‘coming out’. She describes this concern:

My problem is not coming out to the students because I don't really think they understand or really care, they're like a new generation to me. But my problem with coming out to my students or my team, might be that [my partner] and I came out to the basketball team and one of the parents was just very homophobic and came in and said, “I don't want these lesbians teaching my daughter” (Karen, p. 11).

As a new teacher and coach in the school system Karen might feel particularly vulnerable. She does, however, describe how the close nature of her relationship with the athletes she coaches affects her decision about coming out, at least to the team. For example, her partner is also a basketball player and commonly accompanies the team when they compete. She is considering making it clear



that her partner is not just a friend. She states: this year when I coach, I think I'm going to come out and say "this is my partner" because we're [she and the team] just that farther along (Karen, p. 9). Karen again suggests the girls 'know', but as is commonly the situation, the issue is surrounded by silence, the question is unspoken. Due to the apparent success of recently coming out to a few students, and given the close nature of her relationship with her team, it seems Karen is prepared to take a more pro-active approach and announce her partner as such, rather than wait for the question to be asked. Karen did not elaborate on how she feels this may affect her coaching, or the relationship she has with her athletes, however, in light of her successful outing to a few of her students, it seems she is anticipating no significant problems.

Karen also articulated her socio-political view of non-heterosexuality in the broader culture. She states:

My partner and I, we try to be really open because we feel that if 'we' don't feel we're right, then how is everybody else going to think we're right. If we live in the closet, then obviously people are going to think something's wrong with us, and I don't think there's anything wrong with me. You know, our love is just the same, our sex is just the same, everything's the same, there's nothing really wrong (Karen, p. 7).

Karen's views indicate her personal comfort with her sexuality, and her perspective reflects an assimilationist or liberal humanist approach to sexual orientation in the broader social structure (Fusco, 1998; Kitzinger, 1987). This perspective views non-heterosexuals as the 'same' as heterosexuals with the exception of the 'sexual object choice' (Fusco, 1998; Kitzinger, 1987; Sedgwick, 1990). It has been argued that this version of feminism was responsible for many of the gains made in women's sport in the last few decades, including

acknowledgement, increased visibility, and de-marginalizing of lesbians in sport (Birrell, 2000; Hall, 1996).

The advancement however, has been considered by more critical feminists in sport to be inadequate (Birrell, 2000; Hall, 1996). It is argued by those with a radical feminist perspective, that this stance de-politicizes lesbian identity and continues to claim heterosexuality as the centre, the norm and the desired way of being (Kitzinger, 1987). In light of the dominating belief that heterosexuality remains the centre, it is understandable that this ideology may be adopted by non-heterosexuals, particularly gays and lesbians, to move themselves closer to the socially acceptable and predominant (mythical) view of heterosexuality (married, committed to one person). Concurrently, this practice serves to distance gays and lesbians from negative social stereotypes of non-heterosexuality (Fusco, 1998; Kitzinger, 1987). In response to this movement, radical feminists, in both sport and the broader culture, reject liberal humanism as serving the status quo and substituting one de-politicized construction of lesbianism with another (Kitzinger, 1987; Vealey, 1997).

The view of 'similarity' surfaced again in Karen's interview. In an exchange she described with another teacher, Karen was presented with a predominant heterosexist argument that convinces many gay people to question their right to be open and out regarding their sexual orientation. In this case, the argument is placed within the highly charged context of the teacher/student or coach/athlete relationship and what is appropriate to discuss in the context of that relationship. In a close examination of this exchange, Karen seems to reverse her view that

being 'out' sends a message that she is comfortable with her sexuality and has no reason to hide it:

I had a forum on this once [teachers coming out] and the big thing that came out of it, because a lot of teachers are gay, or they're sprinkled about....but one of the teachers made a really good point, it's like heterosexual teachers don't talk to their students about heterosexual sex all the time. The sexual issue...just because I'm gay doesn't mean I need to be talking to my gay students about sex! You know what I mean? It's not an appropriate topic, no matter whether you're gay or straight, right? (Karen, p. 6).

An initial reading of this exchange might be interpreted as an appropriate and legitimate argument. Just because an individual is gay does not mean that his or her sexual life can or should be opened up for discussion. To believe otherwise is to simply link being gay with having gay sex. This simplistic and defining association is not made with heterosexuals. I propose, however, another reading of this exchange. I contend that the argument made here *does in fact*, place the focus of discourse on sexual orientation on 'sexual activity', if only for non-heterosexuals. In other words, a heterosexist perspective purports that stating that you are gay or lesbian is associated with displaying (or discussing) your sex life. This argument has been very effective in silencing non-heterosexuals and camouflages and discounts the reality that homonegativity has a long history and is rooted in economic and social oppression, discrimination and marginalization (Harper and Schneider, 2003; Kitzinger, 1987).

This is in effect an act of cultural hegemony. In other words, the religious right and moral majority, have *convinced* non-heterosexuals that by expressing their sexual orientation as other than a socially sanctioned heterosexual one, they are, in effect, inappropriately displaying their sexual practices. The major

flaw in this argument is the reality that heterosexuals do not have to express themselves as such as it is considered the norm by which all other sexual orientations are measured (Sedgwick, 1990; Warner, 1993). It is, in fact, displayed everywhere in social and cultural expressions, and so it is unnecessary for a heterosexual person to declare themselves, as it is a given in a heterosexist society (Butler, 1990; Chesir-Teran, 2003; Lenskyj, 1995). This places the non-heterosexual in a position of either being *assumed* to be heterosexual or having to *state* their non-heterosexuality (Butler, 1990; Warner, 1993). This has effectively reinforced the invisibility of non-heterosexuals and reified the belief that an identity other than heterosexuality is deviant and socially unacceptable. As a deeply ingrained (and internalized) belief, it has served to silence many gay teachers and coaches. They are left with the option of being closeted or being out and risk being socially and professionally attacked for 'flaunting' their sexual 'behavior' (Griffin, 1992).

Well aware of the risks of coming out to students and staff, Kevin has also struggled with many of aforementioned issues. He states:

In terms of my students, they had an inkling you know, I'm 40 years old, not married and they knew that it was a little like Bill Clinton's army....you don't ask, you don't tell sort of thing....No I'm not out per se to them and I found myself increasingly torn about how much I should be out to them....If I was asked point blank, depending on how it was asked and by what age group and whom, I might just say, "it's not your business what I do", which would be kind of a declaration of yeah I am. But if it was asked in another manner, by another group then I don't think I would have a problem with it, I guess it all depends on the person and the individual (Kevin, p. 8).

In considering coming out to his students Kevin was also concerned with protecting his safety and privacy. It is interesting that he suggested his response

to being questioned might be "it's not your business *what I do*" reflecting again on the 'acts' of sexual orientation difference. This supposed response is possibly reflective of how he is socially defined (and which he has internalized and adopted) by virtue of his non-heterosexuality.

The concerns Karen and Kevin have about coming out and risking discriminatory attitudes and behaviors from students, their parents and other school personnel is evidence that the school system still does not offer an environment in which the expression of a sexual orientation other than a heterosexual one will be openly accepted and celebrated. This also limits teachers' and coaches' ability to address and disrupt homonegativity when they witness it in the school system. For example, Kevin describes an incident, when, in a conflict over homonegative behavior by a student, he pulled back in a response of self-protection: "That particular moment last year was the closest I came to maybe outing myself and making a declaration but I didn't.... I think I let it rest, partly out of self-preservation" (Kevin, p. 10). Karen and Kevin are both aware that outing themselves places them in a position of vulnerability. Working in close contact with young children as teachers and coaches places them under significant social scrutiny (Griffin, 1998, Lenskyj, 1997). They are also required to work within the political environment of the school and the larger educational system. Karen and Kevin suggested that acting as positive role models as gay and lesbian adults, might be seen by some, as their responsibility to non-heterosexual students. They both raised this issue in our interviews and discussed the challenges it raises for them.

### **The role and responsibility (?) of the gay teacher/coach**

Kevin and Karen find that combating homonegativism presents a specific challenge for them as gay teachers/coaches. They place themselves in a precarious position of defending themselves and having their sexuality questioned in a derogatory manner. Karen explains:

And I think it would be easier if I wasn't gay. If I was an open minded, educated person that had maybe gay friends, it would be so easy for me to go in there and talk about it....you know, "people are gay and I have gay friends and"....it would be so easy, but being a gay woman I think it's harder because I have to go in there and kind of tippy toe around it because I am gay, and I don't want to 'toot my own horn', you know what I mean? (Karen, p. 11).

Karen underlines the importance of allies and other non-homosexuals to take up this form of education. It is inappropriate and discriminatory to assume that this is only an issue for non-heterosexuals and their responsibility alone to address it, when in fact, the burden of education lies with the institutionalized system (Human Rights Watch, 2001).

Kevin also expresses the conflict he feels in coming out and acting as a role model for his students/athletes:

I can hide to some degree....but there is a certain amount of guilt associated with that because it is the more flamboyant gays that are the ones making the strides and creating the rights for me....and so I do think about that and I do think about how can I make my small difference and whether it's that teachable moment or....there's a club [gay and lesbian support] here and how can I support that club, you know (Kevin, p. 7).

Often, when the issue of sexual orientation is raised, or homonegative attitudes or behaviors are expressed, a gay teacher or coach, whether they are out or not is placed in a difficult position (Human Rights Watch, 2001). How can they provide support without contravening professional boundaries? For example,

Karen expressed concern and conflict about how to deal with a student who might come out to her. She describes her feelings of conflict:

It's really hard for me because I can see that in an unfriendly homosexual world, that the kids might need a little extra help....and for them to know that I'm gay, or maybe to talk to me would be really great, but I don't know if that's my place?....just because I'm gay...."okay you're my buddy now, you're gay too"....I don't know if that's right. I don't know where to go with that (Karen, p. 7).

While it can be argued that increased visibility of non-heterosexual coaches and teachers can provide desperately needed support and affirmation for non-heterosexual students and athletes (Human Rights Watch, 2001), role model theories have their limitations. For example, Lenskyj (2003) identifies a major flaw in role model theories. She states:

The concept of role model is popular in liberal circles as a central feature of equity and research programs, as if the presence of a few women or Black people will undo centuries of discrimination and oppression (p. 94).

This practice places a member of an oppressed group in a position to not only *represent* all those socially identified with them, regardless of their differences, but, to *reverse* discrimination for all of them, simply by virtue of their presence and/or visibility. In addition to these significant flaws, this concept also places the responsibility of education, and combating oppression on, in this case, non-heterosexual individuals, possibly at great personal cost (Human Rights Watch, 2001). As Karen states: "It's hard because you want to educate people, but....am I the person to educate them?" (Karen, p. 12). What is required, is to position and problematize homonegativity as a systemic endorsement of discrimination based on sexual orientation, and therefore requires systemic examination and action (Chesir-Teran, 2003).

While Kevin acknowledges that the issue of homonegativity is personal for him, he chooses to frame it within the context of human and civil rights. Kevin's teaching and coaching style are infused with teachable moments that celebrate diversity and uncover and deconstruct discourses of oppression and discrimination: "I have a vested interest to try to educate what I think is....not just my values, but what I think is a civil rights issue for everybody" (Kevin, p. 8). While Kevin places considerable value on difference and diversity, it is important to note that civil rights discourses are decidedly focused on the 'same' or 'equivalent to' the dominant society to make their arguments. This assimilationist perspective provides an imperfect fit with the issues of discrimination based on, and reflective of, the fluid nature of sexual orientation and sexual identity differences. Due to its prominence in the discourses of oppression, however, it may provide a starting point and framework for those who are attempting to disrupt and eliminate discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Kevin moves beyond the personal meaning homonegativism has for him and conducts his teaching and coaching practice in a broader context than the curriculum content at hand. He is aware of the complexity of this issue and attempts to provide a degree of safety and fairness that speaks to the complicated nature of diversity of sexuality, race, religion and other central aspects of his students. This is reflected in his description of how he handles religious expression in his PE. class. He describes his approach:

I tell kids with a Crucifix, "No, God will be there, let's take it and put it away, it's unsafe", whereas the Sikh student, I usually allow them to have their band on their arm, because to me it is something that is more significant, now I might be wrong, but it seems to be more significant to



them, and to me it's like not being able to cut their hair, so I allow that, whereas maybe some of the Filipino students who have the crucifix they wear it as much for fashion as they do for their actual....so I try to make that distinction too and let the kids know. To me, that's a teachable moment. I might be wrong on that, but again I think the kids have a better understanding of that, but they don't around gay issues (Kevin, pg. 8).

Kevin is demonstrating his *own* knowledge of the realities of difference and the fluid and complex nature of race, ethnicity, religion *and* sexual orientation. He admits he is making some assumptions that his students have a relatively high level of understanding of the complexities of race, ethnicity and religion, but not of sexuality. This statement is also a reminder that the many layered and complicated challenge of addressing diversity requires a many layered and complicated solution. This may involve missteps, such as making inaccurate assumptions or relying on myths and misconceptions. For example, Kevin may have made an inaccurate assumption regarding the Filipino students wearing their crucifix and the significance (or lack of significance) it has for them, but it appears his intent is to uncover layers, and recognize and acknowledge degrees of difference and diversity. This approach is messy and problematic, and requires a significant amount of time, education and discussion to develop policies and practices that acknowledge and appreciate those differences. Perhaps that is why large institutional settings and systems are ill-equipped, and/or unwilling, to apply a more precise and complex 'equitable' approach, as opposed to a blunt and ineffective 'equality' approach. In other words it is much more challenging, but more appropriate, to treat people differently, in order to treat them fairly, than to ignore historical and deeply entrenched socially based beliefs and biases

surrounding difference, and attempt to simply resolve previous inequities by treating people all the same.

While Kevin is frequently frustrated by the inability or unwillingness of students to see homonegative attitudes and behaviors as inappropriate as racism or religious discrimination, he has had a few hopeful moments. He again describes the situation in which he confronted a female student in his PE class on what he felt was 'bullying' in the form of a homonegative comment to another pair of female students. He took the opportunity to use the situation as a teachable moment and refused to give in when the student resisted his argument. He took considerable amount of class time to argue the issue and later realized he was quite emotional and had to let it go after taking up 30-40 minutes of instructional time. Later, he spoke to other students in the class, to determine their take on the interaction. He states:

I think I might have even said "was I wrong?" to my kids, because I felt close enough to them. And they said, you were too excited or too emotional about it and then another girl said, "but you were absolutely right, you were right", so I felt good about that, and they know, most the kids know when something is just and unjust (Kevin, p. 11).

'Most of the kids know when something is just and unjust'. It is likely the belief that kids are *aware* of discrimination and oppression and *do not approve of it*, that gives teachers and coaches like Kevin hope. Although students might not always stand up and voice their disapproval, believing that they do disapprove, might provide the encouragement teachers and coaches need, to find those 'teachable moments', and use them to educate and inform students on issues that affect them, and all students, in their daily lives.

It is, however, important for teachers and coaches to guard against the powerful temptation to vent to students, or to impose a particular belief system on them regarding the oppressive and damaging consequences of homonegativity and discrimination. Homopositive teachers and coaches may inadvertently adopt this approach in response to frustration over a lack of systemic support and inadequate resources to effectively challenge and disrupt homonegativity in the school system. Unfortunately, this approach has limitations for developing sustainable, self-determined attitude shifts. It is, therefore, imperative the education system provide and maintain space for students (and other school personnel) to acquire knowledge and construct and shape their own attitudes and beliefs surrounding issues of discrimination based on sexual orientation and difference.

### **The perils of the gay coach/PE teacher**

Along with concerns about coming out, and feeling conflicted about their responsibility to act as role models, Karen and Kevin are also highly sensitive to the image they present, and how their actions and behaviors might be misinterpreted should their sexual orientation become widely known. For example, when discussing the risks of being out to her students and athletes, and her role as a PE teacher, Karen expressed concerns about going into the locker room when her students were changing:

*And I'm a female PE teacher. Like, there's the stereotypical female PE teacher who goes and stares at the kids. I'm so aware of that. I think that generally people think if you're a homosexual, that you're attracted to all people of the same sex and that's something that needs to change. And*

the PE teacher is not coming in there and caring about 15 year old girls in their underwear or whatever, you know what I mean? But when it comes to homosexuality it seems that it's been warped a little bit, like we're all warped, we're all pedophiles! In the educated population it's certainly not true, but in the naïve general population, the minority I would say they're still thinking we're deviant. So, I barely ever go in there [locker room], especially in their changing mode, I don't want to be in there.... I just don't want anybody ever to say "Oh Miss [name] came in and was staring at us". I mean it's not a *big* deal, I do go in there, I just don't stare, and I don't stay long and I try and make sure that I go in when most people have changed already, and only when it's necessary (Karen, p. 8-9).

It was clear this was a very sensitive subject for Karen, and she devoted considerable time and effort to ensure she could not be accused of voyeurism. This again illuminates the stereotype of the predatory lesbian PE teacher (Griffin, 1998; Lenskyj, 1997). This stereotype hangs over Karen and complicates her contact with female athletes and students, adding unnecessary complexity to her role as teacher and coach. Lenskyj (1997) describes this reality for lesbian PE teachers: "the homophobic view that lesbians and gay men are pedophiles still holds sway despite ample evidence to the contrary" (p. 14). Griffin (1998) offers a possible explanation of the fabrication of the image of the lesbian as a sexual predator:

Possibly this association is the projection of some men who can use only their own perceptions of sexuality and women as sexual objects to imagine what it must be like to be sexually attracted to women and have access to the women's locker room (p. 58).

She describes the historical basis of this predatory image. She states: "early 20<sup>th</sup> century sexologists believed that lesbians were, in fact men trapped in women's bodies. Thus lesbians are viewed as pseudo-men, exhibiting all the worst aspects of heterosexual male sexuality" (p. 58). This prevalent image still haunts

contemporary lesbian PE teachers, colouring and shaping their actions and behaviors with their students and athletes in order to defend against it.

It appears this might also be of concern to gay male teachers and coaches. Kevin also stated: "Guys' changing rooms, I don't particularly go there" (Kevin, p. 12). I did not ask Kevin his reasons for this, and he did not elaborate on why he avoids the change rooms. It could be that he might feel affected by the sexual surveillance of male teachers around students, particularly in situations where they are in states of undress. Earlier in the interview Kevin stated that as a gay male PE teacher, he 'flies in the face of the gay male stereotype' which reduces the likelihood he will be accused of being non-heterosexual. He did, however, also state that he felt a number of his students/athletes 'had an inkling' and that he knew a number of alumni were aware of his sexual orientation. This might make him particularly sensitive to accusations that he might be 'ogling' male students in the locker room, so he avoids the situation all together.

Curious that this might be a general school policy, and not a specific strategy of these two gay teachers/coaches, I contacted the district athletics coordinator of the VSB. He stated there was no policy against coaches being in the locker room with students or athletes, and, in fact, most coaches have their pre-game talks with their teams in the locker rooms. It appears that due to the common 'sexual predator' stereotype of gays and lesbians, Karen and Kevin were acting on their own to reduce or eliminate any accusations of sexual impropriety that might be made against them.

The analysis of the discussions with Karen and Kevin in this chapter reveal the added challenge they face as gay and lesbian teachers and coaches and the responsibility they may be presented with to educate students, athletes and staff regarding the issues surrounding homonegativity in sport. They feel conflicted about their position as non-heterosexual teachers and coaches and how they might be expected to act as role models for non-heterosexual students and athletes. In addition, their non-heterosexuality places them at significant personal and professional risk. All these factors contribute to a complicated and conflicted existence for them in the school system, one that calls for careful negotiation and navigation on their part.

In the next and final chapter I will summarize the themes raised in the data analysis and make recommendations designed to improve the athletic experiences for females in sport, including lesbian athletes. I will discuss changes that are needed in the school system, in athletics and in the education and training of coaches. In closing I will offer suggestions for future research that will contribute to our understanding and challenging of homonegativity in female athletics.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

#### **Summary**

The stories of the participants weave a textured account of the relationship between sport, female athletes, coaching and the education system. Their discussions with me revealed the complexity of the relationship between coach and athlete and the position and power of the coach in that relationship. They also spoke to the ways female athletes disrupt the male centred tradition of sport, how homonegativity is interpreted and challenged in the broader education system, and the position and functioning of school athletics within that system. In addition, the coach's level of awareness and knowledge surrounding issues of oppression and discrimination, along with their personal experience as an athlete, teacher and coach, all contributed to, and informed their coaching practice. Woven together, these factors determined how they recognized, interpreted and chose to (or not to) confront and disrupt homonegativity in female sports.

Due in large part to their personal experiences in the sport and education system, the stories of the gay and lesbian participants in the study revealed further textured and complex realities and tensions in their practice as coaches and teachers. They articulated their personal conflicts and struggles about coming out to their students, how that affected their relationship with them, and how they were viewed by them. They communicated a level of vulnerability as

non-heterosexuals in a heterosexist system that limited and complicated their interactions with their students and athletes. They reflected on their conflicting feelings regarding their personal and professional responsibility to non-heterosexual students to act as visible role models, versus the protection of their privacy. They also discussed the perils they faced, their concerns about accusations of deviancy, and what they do to protect themselves. This included the avoidance of students' locker rooms to evade accusations of voyeurism and sexual perversion should their sexual orientation become widely known. All of these factors contributed to a complicated and conflicted existence for them in the school system, one that called for careful negotiation and navigation.

While all five coaches stated they have never had to pointedly address homonegativity in their coaching, a number of them did acknowledge that homonegative behaviors may be present in school sports, as much goes on that teachers and coaches do not hear or witness. For example, a number of the coaches suggested that the locker rooms may be sites for discussions around sexuality and possible expressions of homonegativity. Some coaches also speculated on how they would handle homonegativity if they were to witness it or if it was raised by the athletes they coach. This implied that at least some of the coaches were thinking about it, and further acknowledging that it may be present.

The five coaches interviewed also perceived varying degrees of acceptance and support of non-heterosexuality by staff in the schools they teach and coach in. While some expressed a sense of support and at the very least



tolerance, one coach communicated grave concerns about the expression of homonegative attitudes by some of her teaching and coaching colleagues.

While many of the coaches in this study acknowledged or recognized gendered, sexist, heterosexist and homonegative attitudes and behaviors among the students, athletes and teachers in their schools, many did not. Those who did were limited to varying degrees in their understandings and interpretations. My conversations with the participants regarding homonegativity in their schools made me deeply concerned. Insidious and subtle homonegative behaviors were rarely acknowledged as discriminatory, damaging and hateful. For example, I sensed reluctance from many of the participants to recognize behavior, such as the use of anti-gay slurs, as sanctioning deep social hatred and oppression of non-heterosexuals. In fact, their responses in many (but not all) instances implied a belief that students "meant no harm" when using anti-gay language. When the study participants did intervene when they witnessed this behavior, it was rare that there was an opportunity or enough time available to address the issue in any depth.

It became apparent that many did not possess the knowledge, skills or language to articulate, deconstruct and unveil the behavior as homonegative, systemic discrimination of non-heterosexuals. In particular, the sexist and heterosexist underpinnings of sport often went unrecognized, and subtle and subversive forms of homonegativity went unchallenged and uninterrupted. Perhaps most importantly, the realities of teachers and coaches experiences in the school system and the lack of support, time, resources, training and

appropriate environment available to them to deal with homonegativism in any depth, became evident. Those who were making efforts to educate students and athletes regarding homonegativity in sport (or at least expressed their concerns about it) were functioning in isolation and had little support or resources to call on to unravel and combat sexual orientation bias.

### **Combating homonegativity in schools**

As noted above, coaches in the current study taught and coached in a school system that offered them little training, resources or continuing education on the topic of homonegativism, particularly as it occurs in sport. This caused me to question the broader attitudes in the school system and what was being provided in the way of mandatory and preliminary teacher and coach training that was reflective of a *systemic* intolerance of homonegative attitudes and behaviors. What mainstream messages were teachers and coaches receiving about non-heterosexuality, and about creating and maintaining an environment free of homonegativity? What aspects of the curriculum need revision to provide a more homopositive perspective? Was the system providing teachers and coaches with the training and tools necessary to recognize, confront and meaningfully deconstruct homonegativity in all its forms in the school system? Further, were teachers and coaches acting appropriately to disrupt and challenge this homonegativity? Were teachers and coaches receiving support in their individual efforts to disrupt and trouble homonegativity, or was the system creating more barriers than solutions?

In order to address the prevalence and damage caused by homonegative attitudes and behaviors in the school system, the Human Rights Watch report, *Hatred in the Hallways: Violence and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students in U.S. schools* (2001), makes a variety of key recommendations to improve the school climate for LGBT youth in the United States. These include reviewing, and revising where necessary, school nondiscrimination policies and practices to include discrimination based on sexual orientation or sexual identity, and further, ensuring there are no gaps between policy and practice. These practices exist in Canada and in the schools of my participants, but they are not doing enough to reverse and eliminate a long and deeply rooted history of systemic barriers to non-heterosexuals. A broad, integrated systemic commitment to the challenging and eliminating of homonegativity at all levels of government and schooling must underpin and fortify any and all policies related to discrimination if they are to be effectively implemented.

Human Rights Watch (2001) also recommends providing training to all staff (including non-instructional staff) on how to intervene and stop harassment that occurs in their presence. While I have focused the current study around the conceptualization of *homonegativity*, I contend that the focus of this training should be established around the current and emerging *heterosexist* curricula rather than the original anti-*homophobia* curricula which purports a liberal, assimilationist perspective. I argue that an institutional deconstruction of heterosexuality as the naturalized norm and centre, and an acknowledgment of

the fluid and unstable nature of sexuality is required if we are to eliminate the systemic de-valuing of any expression of sexuality seen as 'other'.

Aside from contributing to a school climate that confronts the use of anti-gay language and behavior, thorough and comprehensive training could provide my study participants and other staff and volunteers with much needed tools to deconstruct homonegative behavior and develop, among staff and students, a comprehensive understanding of its systemic basis. This must be acknowledged as the responsibility of the broader school system to deconstruct, educate and provide a forum for students, teachers, coaches and other school personnel to discuss and better understand homonegativity in light of its social complexity. As part of this comprehensive educational approach, I recommend that increased and intensified training be funded by the ministry of education and be conducted by educators who are knowledgeable, skilled and command a deep and thorough understanding of the systemic basis of heteronormativity, heterosexism, and homonegativity. It is also necessary that those conducting the training recognize and value the diverse and unstable nature of sexuality; thereby focusing on acknowledging and appreciating the broad range of sexual identity expression, and developing educational and school policies and practices to reflect that. I also contend that this training must be mandatory at all levels, *including* those in governing, policy making, and administration positions in education. If those responsible for designing broad educational policy and allocating funds are not educated and informed on the deep and damaging effects of homonegativity, and

how it is perpetuated in the school system, it cannot be expected that any positive systemic change will occur.

Training can provide information, raise awareness, increase knowledge and influence values, however, it is critically important that training alone not be seen as a panacea for the deeply rooted attitudes, beliefs and values that reflect homonegativity. An over dependence on training relies on the belief that once individuals are made aware of the degree of intolerance, injustice and hatred that non-heterosexuals are subjected to, they will recognize this as unjust and inappropriate and will discontinue any and all behavior that reifies it. A utopian view such as this naively assumes that "knowledge" will positively shift values and behaviors. This perspective is inadequate to address the complex issues of power, oppression and discrimination. This has been demonstrated by the limited success of training in disrupting and eliminating the discriminatory attitudes and behaviors that surround race, disability and gender. Training alone places a disproportionate emphasis on the individual and their willingness to change. A more effective approach would be multi-pronged, and place an increased focus on the entrenched systemic nature of homonegativity. I suggest that we continue with comprehensive, integrated and recurrent training as part of the solution, however, we must continue to find ways to challenge and disrupt homonegativity at the systemic level for there to be any sustained, meaningful and widespread change.

While it is impossible to 'legislate' homopositive beliefs and values, the education *system* must be homopositive and those working within it must be

made aware that homonegative attitudes and behaviors will not be tolerated at any level. The expectation must be that not only will homonegativity not be tolerated, but the climate must be homopositive, inclusive, supportive, and celebratory of difference. The positive benefits of the presence of supportive and intervening teachers and coaches in the school lives of non-heterosexual students cannot be stressed enough (Human Rights Watch, 2001). Intervening teachers, coaches and administrators who are in contact with students and athletes on a daily basis, are much likely to do so effectively, and consistently, if they are supported in their efforts by the school system.

Most importantly, the Human Rights Watch report (2001) concludes with a statement that speaks to the significance of this issue as a broad social concern, rather than only having relevance to non-heterosexuals. Echoing Sedgwick's (1990) 'universalizing view of sexuality', Human Rights Watch (2001) makes this statement regarding how meeting the demand for creating a climate free of prejudice and discrimination has relevance to all:

The government at all levels, especially school administrators, teachers, and counselors, as well as parents and youth service providers must understand that failing to protect gay youth ultimately harms all youth....When adults fail to model and teach respect for youth, and indeed for all human beings, they send a message that it is acceptable to demean, attack, and discriminate against others because they are or are perceived to be different....The youth who harass others are not only learning behavior that is ultimately harmful to themselves but are acting out their awareness of society's failure to respect the equality and dignity of all human beings (p. 175).

A school climate that educates its students and staff on the systemic underpinnings of oppression and discrimination attacks the problem at its source, and serves to create an environment that is not only free of obstacles, and

prejudicial and discriminatory attitudes and practices, but is inclusive, and celebratory of diverse ways of being. This process has the potential to de-centre those ways of being (heterosexual, white, male, Anglo-Saxon, Christian) that have long occupied a place of privilege in North American society, and in doing so, have ranked 'others' as of lesser value.

The lack of full and unequivocal support for non-heterosexuals within the broader education system is the heart of the problem. It is imperative that we, as parents, teachers, researchers, students, and citizens, demand that educational leaders, at all levels of government and schooling make the issue of disrupting homonegativity at all levels and in all places in the school system of utmost importance. While anti-homophobia policies and training for staff are currently in place, and the climate for non-heterosexuals has improved over the last decade, my discussions with the coaches/teacher in the current study indicate that homonegativity still exists in the education system and needs to be further addressed.

### **Combating homonegativity in sports**

We owe some thanks to high profile athletes such as Mariah Burton Nelson, Billie Jean King, Martina Navratilova and others who have come out and spoken about the homonegativism they and other lesbian athletes have experienced. This has led to some cracking of the silence and improvements in the sport climate for non-heterosexual athletes, and specifically lesbian athletes, at least at the elite level. It bears repeating, however, that role models are limited

in their ability to affect change, and more focused tactics are required to disrupt and dismantle homonegativity in sports.

In an attempt to provide a more strategic, comprehensive, and detailed approach, a number of the aforementioned lesbian athletes, along with others in the field of education, have offered their services, experience and influence to the Women's Sports Foundation in the U.S. in development of an educational kit entitled, *It Takes a Team! Making sports safe for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered athletes and coaches* (2002). This comprehensive kit, easily downloaded from the Women's Sports Foundation website, provides information, strategies and policy statements that can be implemented at a variety of levels in sport settings and in the school system (including high school), to eliminate homonegativism in sport. While the kit addresses a United States context, including laws such as Title IX, it provides a variety of strategies that are relevant to school sport in Canada. It is important to note, however, that use of such a kit is currently voluntary and not mandated. It is imperative that the education system is fully supportive in attitude, policy and message, if pedagogical approaches such as this are to be effective tools at the athletic and coaching level.

In the foreword of the kit, Billie Jean King speaks of the uniqueness of the sport environment and how it provides the opportunity for athletes: "to make ethical choices, from the adherence to the letter and spirit of the rules to the way we treat teammates and opponents" (p. v). She then elaborates on the special role coaches have in the lives of the athletes:



What we love most about being coaches is when we use this environment to give young people the gifts of confidence and self-esteem and see our teams win and lose gracefully and with integrity (p. v).

King's statement is reflective of the close and influential relationship many coaches experience with their athletes, as evidenced in the accounts of the participants in the current study. The influence of the coach as a role model, and as one who establishes the culture and functioning of the team at all levels is significant, and cannot be underestimated. While the coach can be influential at the team level, it is again imperative that the entire *system* role model acceptance, and that the coach be fully supported in his or her efforts to provide an inclusive and positive athletic environment.

The kit goes on to provide discussion questions for athletes, coaches, athletic directors and parents relating to homonegativism in sports. The kit also provides Action Guides for athletes, coaches and athletic directors. The following are some suggestions from the Action Guide for Coaches, as outlined by Pat Griffin, a significant contributor to the kit:

- 1) Educate yourself and colleagues about LGBT issues in sport
- 2) Put a 'Safe Zone' sticker on the locker room door and your office door
- 3) Discourage slurs, jokes or other comments or actions that demean or attack lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender people
- 4) Use inclusive language that does not assume that all coaches or athletes are heterosexual
- 5) Schedule an educational program on LGBT issues in athletics for your team

- 6) Monitor your own stereotyped beliefs about LGBT people and commit yourself to challenging them
- 7) Make clear your expectations for acceptance of diversity among all members of athletic teams
- 8) Answer questions from athletes' parents about lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender people in your programs in ways that do not support or accept prejudice (2002, p. 27).

While these suggestions are comprehensive, and serve to unveil homonegativity within the context of sport, they are practiced at the individual level, and are dependent on an individual's willingness to change. Guidelines such as this would be helpful to include in homonegativity training for coaches, which is currently nonexistent within Vancouver School Athletics. It bears repeating, however, that if homonegativity in school sport is to be recognized as a practice of broad social discrimination, the action of addressing it at the government, school, and athletic administration level is crucial.

Beyond her contribution to the aforementioned kit, Griffin (1999) provides a wealth of suggestions to combat and eliminate homonegativism in sport. She states, "we need to learn how to make room for the diversity present on most teams in ways that do not require the silencing of any group" (p. 55). She outlines strategies through which this can be accomplished: institutional policy, agitation for change, education regarding anti-lesbian prejudice and the functions of the lesbian label and increasing lesbian and gay visibility and solidarity. I argue that of these strategies, the most important are those that focus on the elimination of

barriers and homonegativity at the systemic level. We must demand that teacher's professional development include involved, thoughtful and comprehensive education regarding the deep social biases underlying homonegative behaviors, its insidious and subtle nature, and how to recognize and unravel it. This means more than a single course on 'diversity' in the teacher training program. *All* aspects of teacher education must convey a clear, consistent, and integrated message that de-marginalizes non-heterosexuality and unveils and troubles attitudes and behaviors reflective of homonegative beliefs.

Within this sound systemic support, and with adequate and appropriate education and training included in coaching seminars and instructional programs, coaches can be outfitted with the knowledge and tools they need to understand the complexity of homonegativity in sport and the importance of troubling it and eliminating it. Within a broader school environment of acceptance, the sport climate could be effectively transformed into one that is inclusive of lesbians, and that ultimately is a better place for all female athletes, regardless of their sexual orientation.

### **Limitations of the current study and recommendations for future research**

While it is hoped that the current study serves to contribute to the knowledge and existence of homonegativity in women's sport, and the role of the coach in recognizing, disrupting and combating it, it has some limitations. For example, the small number of participants allowed for a limited exploration of the

issues. Although the interviews provided a wealth of information, coaches' perceptions of homonegativity in sports is a vastly underreported subject and it would be helpful to speak to more coaches about the issue of homonegativity on their teams. The participants were also all in the same age range, late 30's to early 40's, and all were teachers at the schools they coached. These similarities suggest considerable overlap in their education, training and exposure to the issues we discussed. Also, although three of the participants were White and two were Chinese-Canadian, the issue of racial and ethnic diversity was never raised in our discussions, or in my analysis. Further research that focuses on the complexities and interconnectedness of the race, ethnicity, socio-economic status and sexual orientation of coaches and how these aspects of identity and affiliation affect their perceptions, reactions, and responses to homonegativity in sport would be a valuable contribution to the field. Lastly, while I believe the current study made a worthy contribution to our understanding of coaches' perceptions of 'homonegativity' in girls' sports, in retrospect, focusing on 'heteronormativity' might have more effectively highlighted the heterosexist basis of the institutions of sport and education and how it underpins homonegative attitudes and beliefs.

In addition to the above mentioned recommendations, future research on the forces that contribute to homonegativity in the broader school system would shed light on the challenges faced by individual teachers and coaches. To what extent is homonegativity addressed in school curriculum, teacher training and teacher's professional development? How does this broad systemic structure

affect the attitude formation, values, and behaviors of teachers and coaches? What training do they receive on the issue of homonegativity in school and specifically in sports? Is this training effective? Is it enough? What is the most effective way to increase the creation of a homopositive school climate for students/athletes, coaches, teachers, administrators and volunteers? A better understanding of these factors would broaden our comprehension of the current situation and provide a basis for recommended systemic changes. An increased knowledge of what coaching strategies are most effective for dismantling homonegative biases and practices, and how those strategies intersect with current programs and policies in the broader education system, would be helpful for creating an effective and successful approach.

The dismantling of homonegativity in the school system and in school sport specifically is a considerable task, but there has been significant inroads made in recent decades. The current study highlighted both athletes and some teachers/coaches who are challenging, and effectively changing and improving the school and sport experience for both females and non-heterosexuals. A continued research focus on increasing knowledge, understanding, and the development of systemic strategies to dismantle sexism, heterosexism, heteronormativity and homonegativity will contribute to the efforts to deconstruct and re-construct school and school sport so that they provide a safe, non-discriminatory, rewarding and inclusive experience for all.

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### **Form to Indicate Interest in Participating**

I am interested in the possibility of participating in this study. Please contact me with more information:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_ or e-mail address \_\_\_\_\_



This study involves participating in a single interview lasting up to one and a half hours. The interview will focus on questions related to the topics mentioned above. You can stop the interview at any time and can refuse to answer any questions you may not wish to answer.

In order to preserve confidentiality and to give you control over the release of information arising out of these interviews, I will return transcripts of your interview to you so that you may have the opportunity to review and edit them. Tape recordings, diskettes on which transcriptions are stored, and printed copies of the transcriptions will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in my office until five years after the completion of the thesis and publication of any articles or papers about the project. My advisor, Allison Tom, and I will be the only people who will have access to the interview materials.

In appreciation of the contribution of your time to this project, all research participants will be provided with a gift of a bound copy of the publication: *It Takes a Team! Making Sports safe for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Athletes and Coaches*. This is an educational kit for athletes, coaches and athletic directors, published by the Women's Sports Foundation.

If you agree to participate in this research project, please sign the attached Consent Form. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Yours truly,

Simone Longpre  
M.A. Candidate

## **Appendix C: Interview Goals and Sample Questions**

### **INTERVIEW GOALS:**

To record strategies of coaches of high school girls' sports teams for reducing/eliminating homonegativism on the teams they coach, specifically:

- In what ways and forms do coaches see homonegativism displayed on the teams they coach and how do they deal with it when it is encountered
- How have coaches developed and implemented their strategies to combat homonegativism and what if any resistance have they encountered due to their efforts

### **SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

- What sport(s) do you currently coach and what have you coached in the past?
- Can you tell me a little bit about your experience as a coach and the nature of the relationship you have with your players?
- What comes to mind when I use the term "homonegativism"?
- In your experience as a coach of girls' teams, have you encountered homonegativity? If so, are there homonegative attitudes or behaviors that seem specific to the athletic setting? Are any specific to girls' teams?
- How do you approach the issue of homonegativism with your players? Do you raise it at the beginning of the athletic season as included in discussions surrounding code of conduct? Do you wait and respond to specific incidents?
- Have you ever dealt with the issue of homonegativism with your players due to a specific incident? If so, can you describe this?
- Have any athletes confided in you that they were lesbian and asked for your support? Can you describe this?
- How have you developed your strategies for challenging homonegativism on your team?
- Have you been aware of negative or positive reactions to your efforts? If so, can you describe them?

Thank you for your help.

Yours truly,

Simone Longpre  
M.A. Candidate