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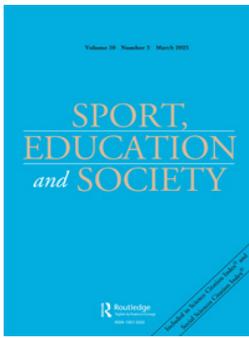
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Utilising the ecological–intersectional model to identify the factors that impact LGBTQ+ coaches' experiences in sport

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ABSTRACT

Intersectionality enables a deeper understanding of the experiences of LGBTQ+ coaches in sport, as an individual's sexuality is not experienced in isolation from other identity factors. Research often addresses the LGBTQ+ community as a homogenous group or focuses solely on one category of identity. For example, previous research has commonly focused on the experiences of lesbian women coaches [e.g. Iannotta, J., & Kane, M. (2002). Sexual stories as resistance narratives in women's sports: Reconceptualising identity performance. *Sociology of Sport Journal, 19*(4), 347–369; Krane, V., & Barber, H. (2005). Identity tensions in lesbian intercollegiate coaches. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport, 76*(1), 67–81; Kauer, K. J. (2009). Queering lesbian sexualities in collegiate sporting spaces. *Journal of Lesbian Studies, 13*(3), 306–318], but other aspects of identity that also shape coaches' experience (such as race, class, disability, etc.) remain underexplored. Resultantly, we adopted the umbrella term 'non-heterosexual' to be inclusive of all genders and non-heterosexual identities, in an attempt to platform voices that are currently absent. The participants ($n = 14$) were coaches across nine different sports, with a broad range of coaching experience (2–30 years) and represented a variety of coaching levels (grassroots to professional). We adopted the Ecological–Intersectional (E–I) model to foreground exploration of how LGBTQ+ coaches' intersectional identities shape their experiences. Specifically, the intersections of sexuality, gender, and race were emphasised by the coaches as factors that significantly impacted their experiences. How and why these intersections worked to shape experience is explored. In doing so, we show the heterogeneity of the LGBTQ+ sport coaching community, and the nuance and complexity of LGBTQ+ coaches' lives.

Introduction

The invisibility and prejudice that the LGBTQ+ population have faced has resulted in often being ignored, and their voices being unheard. For example, when reporting on the current sports work-force, UK Coaching (2022, 2024) and CIMSPA (2023) provided statistics on various demographics, including gender, ethnicity, disability, socio-economic status, and age, yet failed to acknowledge and include sexuality. The omission of sexuality within these reports has two-fold consequences: (1) the number of LGBTQ+ coaches in the UK remains unknown; (2) silencing the non-heterosexual population and their experiences within coaching. With increasing awareness, acceptance, and

inclusion within the sports workforce, redressing social and cultural harms have become important. There is much work to do, as a 2015 survey by Pride Sports, inclusive of coaches from all levels (grass-roots – professional level) noted that in the UK nearly 49% of LGBTQ+ football coaches kept their sexuality hidden in their coaching role, despite being open in other workspaces. In the same survey, 78% of coaches discussed seeing and experiencing negative attitudes and behaviour towards the LGBTQ+ community during their coaching careers. To our knowledge, this survey is the most recent source of data for UK LGBTQ+ coaching experiences. The acceptance and inclusion of LGBTQ+ coaches within the sports workplace first requires an understanding of their experiences. Nonetheless, the importance of experiential knowledge is still not reflected in the coaching litera-ture. To date, there are only five empirical studies that explicitly explored the experiences of non-het-erosexual coaches, all of which focused on lesbian women coaches, three being conducted within the United States (Iannotta & Kane, 2002; Kauer, 2005, 2009; Krane & Barber, 2005), one in Spain (Solanas et al., 2024) and one study within the UK (explored within three outputs; Norman, 2011, 2013, 2016). Griffin's (1998) seminal work's contribution must also be recognised, which explored the identity management of lesbian women coaches, and as a result produced a continuum of such strategies. A summation of the research includes the identity management undertaken by lesbian coaches (Griffin, 1998; Iannotta & Kane, 2002; Krane & Barber, 2005). Griffin (1998) suggested the existence of a continuum ranging from completely closeted to publicly out, but Iannotta and Kane (2002) countered that many coaches utilised non-linguistic strategies and engaged with subtle and mundane ways of making their sexuality known, which did not fit into the continuum. Krane and Barber (2005) further recognised the coaches' negotiation between, and compartmenta-lisation of, their identities as a coach and as a lesbian. This was particularly prevalent in heterosexist sporting environments. Going beyond identity, Norman (2011, 2013, 2016) explored the everyday injustices that were experienced by lesbian women coaches, identifying that they were exposed to gendered homophobic language from other coaches and colleagues, as well as being perceived as less skilled or competent due to their gender, and were marked as predators due to their sexuality. Recently, Solanas et al. (2024) echoed the dual discrimination experienced by lesbian coaches, with homonegativity being rooted in sports culture, and portrayed subtly, often in the form of micro-aggressions. However, coaches who were publicly out, despite the maintenance of heteronormativ-ity in sports culture, saw opportunities to be positive role models, particularly for LGBTQ+ athletes. This contemporary research demonstrated that due to the intersecting identities of sexuality and gender, lesbian women coaches are still facing similar challenges to 10+ years ago. Thus, reiterating the importance of further investigation into the intersectional experiences of non-heterosexual coaches in sport.

Whilst existing work on LGBTQ+ sport coaches highlighted some key issues, scholars must not fall prey to reducing the experience of LGBTQ+ coaches to their sexuality alone (Herrick & Duncan, 2018). There are myriad characteristics that intersect to shape an individual's identity, and the meaning and influence of those intersecting characteristics change depending on an individual's sociocultural context (Cho et al., 2013). The previous literature that explored lesbian coaches' experiences highlighted the intersection of gender and sexuality. However, beyond sexuality, humans are gendered, classed, (dis)abled, raced, aged, nationalised, occupied and various other intersecting identities that are either self or socio-culturally created, or thrust upon that person (Kafer, 2013). For example, the intersection of race, sexuality, and gender of intercollegiate sports employees were investigated by Walker and Melton (2015). Findings included white les-bians experiencing privilege compared to their non-white counterparts, while being a woman within environments dominated by men was perceived to be a disadvantage by all, regardless of race. Additionally, it was 'the norm' to hide non-heterosexual sexualities, primarily influenced by heteronormativity within their organisations. The evidence of multiple marginalised identities intersecting to shape sport employees' experiences affirms the importance of intersectional research. For example, the experiences of a 22-year-old, white, non-binary coach within rec-reational netball, will be different to the experiences of a 50-year-old, black, gay man within

elite football. As part of the LGBTQ+ community they would have mutual experiences, but other intersections of their identities work to shape differing experiences.

Adopting an intersectional lens to further advance research among LGBTQ+ coaches is a promising approach, as many gaps exist regarding the exploration of coaching experience alongside other identity characteristics (Burgess et al., 2024). LaVoi and Glassford (2021) advocated for the importance of intersectionality as their research indirectly documented that the experiences of LGBTQ+ women and men differed. To our knowledge, the representation of the experiences of gay men coaches is limited to a Master's thesis (Thomae, 2011), an autobiography (Anderson, 2003) and a blog post (Ziegler, 2015), all based within the USA. Though Cavalier (2009, 2011) and MacCharles and Melton's (2021) research contributed to our understanding of gay men working within the sports workforce, it was not coaching specific. Further, consideration of coaching experience beyond binary definitions of gender and sexuality is required, as the voices of individuals who do not fit into these categories are not heard. Moreover, Kamphoff and Gill (2013) and Norman (2016) noted the existing literature is yet to explore recreational or grassroots coaching due to a focus on high-performance. Thus, without an intersectional lens, research often 'fails to acknowledge how multiple diverse identities operate simultaneously' (Melton & Bryant, 2017, p. 63).

The Ecological–Intersectional (E–I) model is yet to be utilised as a framework within research on LGBTQ+ populations in sport. However, it has been adopted within research primarily focussed upon women's experiences within sport, including women coaches (Banwell et al., 2020; Hogan et al., 2021; Karlik & Wolden, 2023; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012; Organista & Kossakowski, 2024; Pill et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2023). By considering the multiple ecological layers within the framework, existing research evidenced a range of barriers and supports for women within coaching, such as the 'old boys club', lack of confidence, lack of role models and being the only woman. Similarly, Cunningham (2012, 2019) employed a multilevel model to consider macro, meso, and micro influences on LGBT athletes to offer a holistic understanding of experience. Multilevel systems, like the E–I model, demonstrate the complex interplay within and between levels of social interaction. Cubrich (2020) acknowledged that organisations are multi-level systems, therefore multilevel analytical models are congruent with understanding the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals within sporting organisations. Socio-cultural narratives in sporting contexts often problematise marginalised groups, such as women and LGBTQ+ individuals, rather than acknowledging and addressing systemic issues that maintain exclusion and marginalisation (Kamphoff & Gill, 2013). Therefore, the E–I framework was selected to ensure a multi-level analysis of organisations alongside intersections of LGBTQ+ coaches. The aim of this research was, therefore, to address the current gaps with regard to LGBTQ+ coaching literature by exploring UK coaching experiences through an intersectional lens.

Ecological–Intersectional model

The E–I model (LaVoi, 2016) was developed from the ecological model used by LaVoi and Dutove (2012). Advancements to this model resulted in a lens that now incorporates the ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979, 1993), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), and power (Foucault, 1978). The model identifies four socio-ecological levels which influence experience: individual, interpersonal, organisational, and socio-cultural. LaVoi (2016) expressed that by incorporating intersectionality within the E–I model, researchers are guided to consider the coaches' experiences along different identity axes, and how they may be exposed to intersecting forms of systemic injustice, oppression, and social inequality. Since 'coaching is a social process that is inherently laden with power' (LaVoi, 2016, p. 17), power is an essential component within the E–I model. Within this model, power is considered from a Foucauldian lens where it is not a possession that can be 'acquired, seized, or shared' (1978, p. 94), but rather a relational phenomenon that is created within individual interactions. Evidenced by the diagram of the model (see LaVoi, 2016, p. 14), a bi-directional arrow represents power across levels, implying that dominant power structures should be interrogated

(from the top down), while acknowledging that individuals have agency to create change and disrupt systems (from the bottom up).

Methodology

Participants

Prior to recruitment and data production, institutional ethical approval and informed (and process) consent were gained. To enhance the diversity of participants, maximum variation sampling was employed utilising a purposefully broad criteria (rather than the researcher selecting diverse cases) (Patton, 2015), i.e. 18+, identify as non-heterosexual (any identity within the LGBTQ+ spectrum), work within the UK, have a minimum of 1 year coaching experience, and a volunteer or paid coaching role. Purposive criterion and snowball sampling were undertaken, which are common methods when the target population is 'hardly reached out to', due to the sensitivity of the topic or the specific criteria required to participate (Browne, 2005). The term 'hard to reach' has been contested, with alternatives including underserved (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015). See Burgess (2025) for further insight regarding recruiting participants within sensitive nature research. The participants (*n* = 14) were coaches across nine different sports, namely mountaineering (1), athletics (1), swimming (1), cricket (1), tennis (1), lacrosse (1), basketball (2), rugby (2) and football (4) and all identified under the umbrella term of non-heterosexual. Due to the awareness that some individuals may prefer to use phrases or descriptions rather than binary categories of sexuality (Callis, 2016), the coaches were asked to describe their sexuality, in which they stated: 'gay', 'pansexual', 'gay or lesbian', 'lesbian, gay, or queer', 'bisexual, if not pansexual', 'bisexual, attracted to anyone of any gender', 'gay/lesbian but actually probably bisexual' and 'bisexual but prefer gay/queer and doesn't like to use labels'. When describing their gender identity, participants stated: 'female', 'female/androgynous female', 'cisgender woman', 'non-binary woman', 'non-binary', 'male', 'cisgender male' and 'man but I don't really like using man or woman'. Seven of the participants used 'she/her' pronouns, two used 'she/they', one used 'they/he' and four used 'he/him'. Five acknowledged that they were paid for their coaching role, and two volunteered, however, seven coaches expressed that they were in paid and volunteer positions simultaneously. Their ages ranged between 20 and 47. There was a broad range of coaching experience, from 2 to 30 years, across a variety of levels, from grassroots to professional level. Relevant demographic information was collected from the participants; however, this information will not be presented in table format to prevent the coaches being identifiable.

Data production and analysis

This study is a component of a broader doctoral research project, which explored the work-related experiences of non-heterosexual coaches. The research aims included identifying the factors that impact non-heterosexual coaches' experiences (which this paper corresponds to), alongside analysing coaches' identity negotiation and impression management, and co-producing recommendations aimed at interpersonal and organisational levels. Data were produced through semi-structured interviews. The key topics within the interview were informed by engaging in and incorporating essential knowledge in the field (presented in the Introduction) and addressing identified gaps in that knowledge. Interviews were designed to include exploration of demographics, coaching journey (including the impact of sexuality and other identity factors), identity management (including factors that impacted these decisions), coaching climates (including interpersonal and organisational factors), and progress (including recommendations to improve/maintain good practice). The interviews ranged from 54 min to 2 h 45 min, with a total of 1446 min (24+ hours). Two took place in person, and 12 took place online via Microsoft Teams. Ethical considerations included prioritising confidentiality, and anonymity, alongside participants' comfort throughout the research process. For anonymity, self-selected pseudonyms were utilised, and all identifiable information, such as

organisation/club names were removed from transcripts. Furthermore, all coaches received a debrief, which included relevant signposting if necessary.

In preparation for analysis, the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Braun and Clarke's (2022) process for Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was used as a guide, including the six established phases, namely, (1) familiarising yourself with the data set, (2) coding, (3) generating initial themes, (4) developing and reviewing themes, (5) refining, defining and naming themes and (6) writing up. Due to the consideration of intersectionality, the E–I framework (LaVoi, 2016) was selected prior to data analysis. The analysis was abductive, since the researchers' interaction with the data produced the codes (inductive), and the codes were informed by the pre-specified framework (deductive). Following the precedent of Harvey et al. (2018), the factors were identified and then assigned to one of the four levels within the E–I model.

Findings and discussion

By analysing the coaches' work-related experiences, this research highlighted positive experiences and illuminated challenges and inequalities within coaching. The figure below demonstrates the factors identified that impacted the experiences of LGBTQ+ coaches, across the levels of the E–I model. Despite being categorised, some of the factors impacted multiple levels. As suggested by LaVoi and Dutove (2012, p. 20), all levels intersect, which is demonstrated in the diagram below by the dashed lines separating the levels, suggesting permeability. Aligning with the focus of this special issue, the factor 'intersecting identities' will be explored further. However, this is not to say that the other factors identified across all four levels are less significant. At the individual level, LaVoi (2016) identified sexual identity, gender, class, age, race, disability, and parental status as intersectional identities. However, not all were mentioned by the coaches within this research. The intersecting identities that are explored below are sexual identity, gender, and race, since they were identified as significant to the participants; emphasising that despite being part of the LGBTQ+ community, the coaches are not a homogenous group (Herrick & Duncan, 2018).

Individual level – intersecting identities

The following discussion will unfold intersecting identities, demonstrating how an intersectional lens is drawn on throughout. An intersectional approach does not attempt to consider every aspect of someone's identity, yet aims to reflect upon the nuance and complexity of experience, by examining the relationships between different aspects of identity, socio-cultural context, and implications for power relations (Frost & Elichaoff, 2010). When discussing their experiences, Loki (pansexual, man*,[1] swimming) expressed: 'I don't want to compare and contrast certain sexualities within the LGBTQ community, I'm not trying to do that, like each one comes with its own issues'. The word 'issues' refers to complexities of navigating non-heterosexual identities within a heteronormative society, rather than implying that non-heterosexual individuals are the problem. Similarly, this research is not to compare sexual identities, yet provide insights into diverse individuals' experiences within sports coaching. It is important to reiterate that identities (gender, sexuality etc.) are not additive, these elements overlap and are not lived or experienced separately. This was emphasised by Claire (bisexual, cisgender woman, rugby):

> we like to think sometimes about sexuality as a really separate thing and it's like it appears in certain situations and it doesn't appear in other situations, but I like to think of myself as a more integrated person I am all the things at all the times, you just choose to show different faces of you.

For clarity, we address the identities highlighted by participants in turn through the findings and discussion. Yet, we wish to note that we do not view different identities as additive, but focus on

identity factors embedded in coaching contexts and intersecting with multiple other identity facets.

Sexual identity, visibility and disclosure

Intersectionality highlights the multiplicity of identities which shape how we experience the world. However, not all identities are visible. It is essential to recognise that sexuality is an invisible identity, despite prominent stereotypes. Thus, LGBTQ+ individuals can actively negotiate their identities. All coaches were out about their sexuality to some extent within coaching and their sexual identities were diverse. Sexualities whereby individuals are or have the potential to be attracted to more than one gender, such as bisexual, and pansexual, fall under the umbrella term of plurisexual (House et al., 2021). Six of the coaches indicated a plurisexual identity. These individuals' experiences often changed depending upon if they were in a perceived heterosexual or non-heterosexual relationship. 'So, life's a bit easier now because I can you know I have a boyfriend [laughs], had I had a girlfriend, things might have been different you know, and I might have been perceived differently' (Claudette). Claudette (pansexual, non-binary, athletics) later mentioned being 'normal' due to her long-term relationship with a man, despite identifying as pansexual, and non-binary. Claudette's perception was that others presume her to be a woman in a relationship with a man, therefore, assumed heterosexual and 'normative'. As discussed in Burgess et al. (2024), this also occurred with Loki (a man*) whose previous partner, a (trans) woman was present within their coaching setting: 'I'm still just in that space presumed to be like a man as they understand a man and a woman, you know it's very rigid'.

Disclosure of sexual identity is a significant (and continual) event within the lives LGBTQ+ individuals. For example, Claire (bisexual, cisgender woman, rugby) is in a relationship with another woman, and was open about this within her coaching environment. However, she emphasised that she did not state her sexual identity (bisexual). The lack of declaration was not unique to those with plurisexual identities, however, for those who made their relationship with someone of the same gender known, their non-heterosexuality was assumed. Contrarily, for those who identified as bisexual/pansexual/queer, if they were in a relationship with someone of a different gender, they were presumed to be heterosexual. Moreover, Julie (queer/no label, female, basketball) discussed being in a relationship with a woman, after being in a relationship with a man; both known to the athletes she coached:

> when I had a boyfriend, I used to refer to him as my boyfriend, so if I started referring to someone as my partner, they'd probably question it anyway, so I was like but also I shouldn't have to change just because they're a different gender.

Julie reiterated that she wanted to refer to both relationships in an equal manner to encourage normalisation of non-heterosexual relationships; this was received positively by her athletes, 'just amazing, like they are part of the new generation that doesn't care [about sexuality]'. Despite heteronormativity being maintained within sport, as per the E–I model (Figure 1), power is relational (Foucault, 1978). Therefore, coaches have agency to disrupt dominant discourse around heteronormativity, evidenced through Julie and other participants' words and actions. Like participants in Iannotta and Kane's research (2002), it could be suggested that coaches in this research were not 'explicitly out', as they did not announce their sexual identity. However, it has been argued that 'coming out' conflicts with the fluidity of identity and reinforces the hetero/homo binary (Kauer, 2005; Sedgwick, 2008), which most coaches in the research resisted. Additionally, Moore (2012) proposed that 'coming out' is itself heteronormative as only LGBTQ+ individuals are expected to declare an 'alternative' sexual identity, thus becoming situated as 'other'. Kerry (gay, female, rugby) reiterated this; 'I'd like to see a society where you don't need to come out, I mean nobody comes out as straight'. Therefore, the coaches' visibility and indication of being in non-heterosexual relationships disrupt heteronormativity, without reinforcing binaries. The coaches' negotiation of identity and impression management varied, yet they recognised that being openly non-heterosexual

Figure 1. Factors that impact LGBTQ+ coaches experiences, utilising the E–I model.

resulted in them being role models (particularly for athletes), by being visible LGBTQ+ coaches and normalising non-heterosexualities, while also positively impacting closeness with others within their sport environments.

Gender matters, marginalisation and privilege

Another intersectional identity coaches noted as important for shaping their experiences was gender, within this we will explore the impact of gender upon the experiences of non-heterosexual women, men, and gender non-conforming coaches. First, the presence of other LGBTQ+ coaches created a liberative, safe space for coaches to share their identities: 'I'm in an environment I'm very lucky that some of the coaches at the club are female and have girlfriends, erm, so you know it's not like a hush hush topic for us' (Julie). Moreover, the addition of sport socio-cultural contexts also shaped experience of coaches of all genders. For example, Charlie expressed that within women's lacrosse, 'the vast majority of coaches are women', which contrasts with the notion that sports coaching is dominated by men and emphasises the significance of sport-specific context. Further, Claire recognised 'it's not unheard of for a queer woman to be a rugby coach [laughs], there is an ongoing stereotype about women involved in rugby union and it is not a negative stereotype, it is a stereotype based in truth'. The

coaches discussed the expectancy of non-heterosexual women coaches within particular sports, such as women's rugby, women's football, lacrosse, and outdoor sports (Broad, 2001; Kauer & Krane, 2006). Interestingly, Claudette suggested that 'nothing [sport] is stereotypically sort of male gay', alongside Elizabeth (gay, female, mountaineering) proposing 'a gay male coach for example is not seen as masculine as a heterosexual male coach, so might find it trickier in that sense'.

Many factors impact the coaches' outness, such as context, people, interactions, and time (House, 2023). This includes sporting climates, and presence of other LGBTQ+ individuals (coaches or athletes). Calhoun et al. (2011, p. 303) suggested that the dearth of research regarding non-heterosexual men in coaching 'illuminates how gender, power, and sexual identity are inseparable in sport and play out in different ways', as they are silenced, compared to non-heterosexual women coaches. A prominent similarity across the coaching environments was the lack of (openly) non-heterosexual men:

> I believe every male who coaches alongside myself or in the organisation they consider themselves to be straight, I don't believe there's any who identify as part of the LGBTQ community, erm now I'm not too sure if that's because they just don't or they just aren't open. (Julie)

Cavalier (2009, 2011) expressed the difficulty when recruiting gay men working within sport compared to lesbians, suggesting that gay men have shallower networks or are more hidden. Chris (pansexual, male, football) highlighted 'when I first came [to organisation], I was kind of the first openly gay, now there were gay guys that worked there, and they were openly gay, but they'd never talk about it'. Unlike other coaches' experiences, gay men were present in Chris' workplace. Despite not discussing their sexuality, Chris described these men as openly gay, suggesting a 'glass closet', whereby their non-heterosexual identities are known but not discussed (Griffin, 1998). However, the glass closet is usually present within conditionally tolerant sporting environments. Since Chris did not insinuate a hostile or conditionally tolerant environment, these coaches could be 'implicitly out', whereby their identity is known without it being named (Griffin, 1998). It is important to acknowledge that although the coaches have agency, it is often constrained, resulting in individuals upholding social norms. In this case, the coaches may heed to the idea that their sexuality should be considered as private, and therefore, were silenced.

As a man, Steve (gay, male, football) noted the privilege that he held within sport coaching 'being a white male, there is privilege with that, and I get that' (see also MacCharles & Melton, 2021). However, he expressed a concern about being openly gay and that becoming something others defined him through, 'there's certainly a worry that you won't be taken as seriously and you will be reduced to your sexuality, but again that's not the only personality trait I have'. Steve elaborated on not being taken seriously, referring to many stereotypes around non-heterosexual men being 'a bit softer, a bit weaker, a bit more feminine, a bit more emotional'. This highlights an important intersectional oppression that non-heterosexual men coaches may experience should they be open about their sexuality; stereotypical representations of gay men being 'less than' or more feminine than straight men may come to dominate perceptions of that coach. As a result, men who are open about their non-heterosexuality may be viewed as incompatible with coaching in sports that value (stereo)typically masculine traits of strength and aggression (Kian et al., 2015). Literature on hegemonic masculinity in sport has highlighted that an accepted trait of male sports environment is open homophobia (Connell, 1995); yet Anderson (2009) established contrasting experiences, and thus created the inclusive masculinity theory. Therefore, the intersectional identities, and the context and culture of men's sport, may give rise to the unique experiences of non-heterosexual men in coaching.

Kamphoff and Gill (2013, p. 59) stated that 'male athletes and coaches do not have to "prove" their heterosexuality, however, they are assumed to be heterosexual – which is one of the major differences in how men and women experience homophobia in sport'. This is likely to be dependent upon gendered expectations, such as presenting masculinity. The non-heterosexual men within

this research mostly referred to themselves as masculine either regarding appearance or behaviours, 'I present quite masculine quite straight for want of a better word' (Chris), 'I am openly gay but not following in terms of you know I am more heteronormative in my behaviours and actions' (Boris), 'that kind of lads' lads culture is also my identity … so for me it wasn't a case of I had to bend to fit that' (Steve). Like the coaches within this research, Thomae (2011) reported that gay men coaches with masculine identities believed they challenged the traditional stereotypes associated with gay men. MacCharles and Melton (2021) noted that gay men working within masculine sports often felt more pressure to conform to gendered societal expectations regarding their appearance and behaviour, as being gay did not align with sporting norms. Thus, despite the coaches asserting that they disrupt the stereotypes, it could be that they have conformed to heteropatriarchal expectations and distanced themselves from negative stereotypical ideas. However, Loki (pansexual, man*, swimming) suggested that they were 'very kind of effeminate' and referenced appearance indicators, such as piercings and clothing, yet they believed that they were still assumed to be heterosexual. Despite Loki disrupting heteronormativity due to their gender and sexual identities, and expression, the dominant discourse remains, presuming heterosexuality.

Gendered differences were acknowledged by the men coaches when working with women athletes. Theodore (gay, cisgender male, football) and Chris (pansexual, male, football) had similar experiences working within women's football:

> I certainly know that working in the women's game made me much more attentive as an individual because I was conscious, not because of anything that they were doing, I was conscious that I was you know a male coming into a female environment and I didn't experience the world like them. (Theodore)

Alongside, 'I almost use [non-heterosexuality] as a tool, when I was coaching with the women it was the first thing I said, because I know they're now going to be more comfortable with me' (Chris). The suggestion that non-heterosexual men coaches were less of a threat to the women due to their sexuality was also established within Glassford's (2021) research. Interestingly, this was also implied by women working within men's teams. Thus, reiterating that the predatory stereotype surpasses gender, and is presumed to all within the LGBTQ+ community. Moreover, the predatory stereotype illustrates the bi-directional arrow of power within the E–I model, as the dominant discourses and stereotypes surrounding non-heterosexuality at the socio-cultural level are perpetuated at the interpersonal and organisational level and are shaping the coaches' experiences throughout their career.

Interestingly, the women coaches presumed it to be more challenging for non-heterosexual men within coaching, than other genders. Nonetheless, within a profession predominantly consisting of white, heterosexual men, heteropatriarchy is maintained. As a result, women and other gender minorities often experience marginalisation, therefore, those with non-conforming sexualities could experience further trivialisation (Norman, 2011, 2013). Within this research, alongside identities across the spectrum of non-heterosexuality, four coaches were gender non-conforming. When discussing her gender identity (non-binary) situated within sports coaching, Claudette divulged:

> whether I'm male or female or somewhere in between doesn't sort of matter in that way, because I'm almost not female if you see what I mean already, because I'm sat within this male dominated type of a thing … so it's easier to be like not a girl if that makes sense, so if I can align with the guys which is fairly straightforward for me to do … well it makes it easier if you get dumped in a load of blokes and you can just bloke up [laughs] if you see what I mean, from that perspective it's easier, I don't know, I think I probably find it more difficult actually with a group of women, I'm not sure whether I could girl up.

Previously, lesbians within the sports workforce suggested that their sexuality makes it easier to connect with men (Melton & Bryant, 2017). The alikeness between non-heterosexual women and heterosexual men was emphasised by many coaches (due to their attraction to women), which may give them a 'buy in'. Despite Claudette not identifying as a lesbian woman, she suggested 'fitting in' more with men than women, due to transgressing the gender binary, and therefore not aligning with expected gender norms of femininity.

Trans* and non-binary individuals in the UK have asserted the challenges of identifying as gender non-conforming within sport participation (Barras, 2021). However, insight from trans+ and non-binary coaches is lacking (Piggott et al., 2024). Loki (man*) highlighted the tensions and complexities of how they identified and viewed sexuality and gender identity, and the way sport is structured and policed (implementation of sports policies regarding trans+ participation):

> I think in terms of certainly identifying as pansexual in my coaching, as a pan coach, because essentially to me gender is fluid, it really goes completely against sport as a whole, and as a coach it fundamentally changes how I understand sports should be structured … I think that's another reason why I can't necessarily bring my identity into it because the world as I perceive it in terms of gender doesn't exist in the world of sport and if I want to coach I have to just – I have to accept I think, I don't accept it, but in order to be able to just deal with it.

In coaching, the everyday lives of those in the workforce are significantly influenced by the norms and values of their organisations and governing bodies, the maintenance of norms and the subtlety of marginalisation becomes routine, and therefore are rarely acknowledged or questioned (Norman, 2011, 2013). Here, Loki has queried the norms, yet suggested that:

> you take on all these things that you don't really wanna take on, in order to belong in that space, the negotiation is to kind of stick to the status quo, you basically have to weigh up how willing you are to not feel comfortable, or to be you know ostracised or be questioned in order to be out in that space.

This demonstrates that the levels are not mutually exclusive, with socio-cultural and organisational norms (including heteropatriarchy) influencing factors at the individual level (outness) and thus interpersonal relationships, which are explored further below.

An example of sporting culture and norms is banter, which is prominent within sport organisations, and can be positive for morale, staff connections, etc., however, the role of banter reflects a form of power operated for exclusion (Preston & Velija, 2022). In particular, women and other minorities within sport, and coaching are made to feel uncomfortable by comments made by others (Norman, 2011; Thomas et al., 2021). Emily (gay/lesbian, female, football) provided various examples of inappropriate comments made by (heterosexual men) coaches:

> there's the ongoing comments about turning me, and 'you're only going through a phase', and that still happens when everyone gets drinks in them, that still happens but I've always – I've always had that, and I've always laughed it off, I will openly go to them no, men are just absolutely horrendous in bed, and I'd say I'm sure your wife would tell you if she was honest with you and then they just stop you know.

Despite often being intended as humour, the gendered homophobic language used often results in coaches feeling humiliated (Norman, 2011) or retaliating, as demonstrated by Emily. Consequently, individuals often feel required to partake in banter to prevent becoming a target or perceived as being unable to take a 'joke' (Preston & Velija, 2022). Commonly, individuals often minimise the impact of jokes made (Organista & Kossakowski, 2024; Solanas et al., 2024), while clubs often do little to challenge comments made by individuals, including those that are inappropriate or discriminative (Spaaij et al., 2020). Following gendered differences, the coaches who spoke positively of banter were primarily men: 'I'll joke about [sexuality] and it kind of sets a precedence where it's not people walking on eggshells around me, instead it's a bit more normalised' (Steve). Theodore provided a unique insight, having worked within both men's and women's teams:

> in a highly testosterone fuelled environment banter takes a whole new level, I'm not saying that that environment is toxic or bad or negative … it's just an observation of it's a highly testosterone fuelled competitive sporting environment, and we can't escape from that. In the women's game there was banter of course there was, you know it went the other way, it was almost excessive gay banter.

The experiences of participants discussed above demonstrate the intersection of gender and sexuality. They reiterated the impact of gender throughout their stories and how that related to expressions of power through social interactions. Despite women often being the focus when

considering gender in sport (Brackenridge et al., 2008), participants highlighted that other under-served voices need platforming (non-heterosexual men, and gender nonconforming coaches).

Race, and the dominance of whiteness

While gender was a significant intersecting identity for the coaches, Billie (gay, androgynous female, cricket) explained that:

> race has been a big thing because I'm mixed race, particularly with the Asian girls I've noticed a lot more girls being more receptive towards me or you know get involved, I've noticed a lot of the Asian parents will come to me and talk about things which obviously it's a nice thing, but it's also you know if I'm not there, then who do they go to, or do they feel that they can be part of things?

In this research, only one of fourteen coaches were non-white, reflecting the common dominance of white coaches (CIMSPA, 2023; UK Coaching, 2022, 2024). Billie highlighted the dominance of white-ness, while emphasising that her race was significant to others within her coaching environment, providing relatedness, and visibility of intersecting identities, as a gay androgynous female. Since race is a visible identity, Billie continuously displayed this identity yet was able to negotiate her sexuality in sport. Billie alluded to not being open about her sexuality within her other profession, stating that it was 'freeing' to be able to be open within her coaching environment. Billie's statement indicates that sport has the potential to be a safe environment for LGBTQ+ coaches. Chris (pansexual, male, football) reiterated the significance of invisible and visible stigmatised identities. As sexuality is invisible, he can 'pass', which cannot occur with race:

> if you work with more diverse communities from like a race or ethnicity point of view, they can't hide that, it's really it's really easy to say okay well when I walk down the street people see a white guy, they don't see a gay white guy because I'm not presenting that necessarily, whereas a black guy walking down he is constantly pre-senting that.

Like coaches within Walker and Melton's (2015) study, white dominance and privilege were acknowledged:

> I think being white has privileged me more than I would even – I wouldn't even think of it, that's how privileged I would be, in my coaching environment and all of the centres nearby, all of the coaches are white, I don't coach any children who aren't white. (Elizabeth)

Beyond acknowledgement of their privilege, Claudette noted 'they say you know the whole thing with privilege is recognising the privilege you do have, so you know I tick the white box'. The white coaches in this research seldom discussed race, or its impact upon their experiences within coaching. This is likely to be due to being the 'norm', since they work within a majority white sports workforce. However, Loki communicated that whiteness went beyond race:

> my whiteness has probably had a huge amount of impact, when I say that it's not just my skin, it's that you know I'm presumed straight, to have a certain worldview, I guess the word I could use is centre right … you know, if someone just looks at me and where I'm from, I think that has had the greatest influence in terms of the oppor-tunities I've been afforded.

Fletcher et al. (2020) discuss whiteness as a concept, which privileges some people over others. In this study, the reference is to white individuals who are privileged within sport due to the workforce dominated by white men. Fletcher et al. (2020) reiterated that there are many declarations about athletes and coaches within sport to improve opportunities for marginalised groups, including racial minorities however, increased representation would not necessarily deconstruct the engrained white privilege within sports cultures. It is because white privilege in countries like the UK is deeply rooted in colonial history, which is still shaping contemporary social structures, including sport. White privilege operates as an unspoken norm, granting advantages to those racialised as white, while systematically marginalising those who are not. In sport, this is evident in the underrepresen-tation of racial minorities in leadership positions and the racialised scrutiny of athletes of colour. The

power structures established through colonialism, coupled with emerging right-wing populist senti-ments across Europe (Molnár, 2023), continue to inform attitudes in various domains, reinforcing the exclusion and devaluation of non-white individuals.

When considering the intersection of race and sexuality, Billie also acknowledged the perceived incompatibility between being non-heterosexual and non-white; 'I think some reason being mixed race or non-white they assume people can't be gay'. This problematic stereotype of gay = white reinforces preconceptions surrounding sexuality and the expected appearance of non-heterosex-uals, highlighting the intertwined nature of race and sexuality norms (Worthen, 2018). Additionally, it is suggested that views towards non-heterosexuality are less tolerant within south Asian and Car-ibbean countries, and are often influenced by religious beliefs (Magrath, 2017). This was confirmed by Billie:

> my mum's side know [about her non-heterosexuality], the English side yeah, on my dad's Sri Lankan side, no, because there's quite a lot of Christianity and stuff, so and it's not that I particularly care if they know or if they react, it's more the backlash my dad will get from it, so almost trying to protect him from it.

Moradi et al. (2010) affirm lower levels of outness for LGB people of colour, particularly within family and religious community contexts, with concern surrounding the impact upon others, rather than themselves. The intersecting identities of the coaches, and the impact of those on workspace narra-tive reiterate that LGBTQ+ coaches experiences are not homogeneous. As emphasised by Fletcher et al. (2020), to instigate meaningful change, requires understanding the needs and desires of the target populations. Therefore, we need to be mindful about how intersecting identities shape non-heterosexual coaches' experiences in ideocratic ways.

Conclusion

Utilising the E–I model as a framework, the factors that impact LGBTQ+ coaches' experiences, across four levels, individual, interpersonal, organisational and socio-cultural were identified, with intersectionality at the core. In response to the special issue, we focussed specifically on demonstrating the impact of intersectional identities of LGBTQ+ coaches within sport, which is limited within previous literature. The results presented above demonstrate the complexities of multiple marginalised identities, alongside the nuances of experiencing marginalisation and privi-lege simultaneously. Since this research was inclusive of all non-heterosexualities, we have dis-cussed the influence of sexual identity, in particular the unique experiences of disclosure for those who have plurisexual identities. Whilst gender was identified as a significant factor, it was extensively interconnected with sexuality. Participants, depending on their gender identification and the representation of their self, experienced the perception of their sexuality in relation to their gender in sport coaching. Moreover, we platformed voices of non-heterosexual men and those who identify as gender non-conforming (e.g. non-binary) which is lacking within previous literature. Finally, we highlighted the significance of race as it intersects with sexuality, by one coach speaking to her experience as a non-white coach, alongside other coaches affirming their white privilege. Based on the evidence provided, we argue that to be able to create change within policy and practice as regards the experiences of LGBTQ+ sport coaches, a detailed under-standing of the varied experiences of our participants in their cultural settings and the impacting factors are essential, to which this research aims to contribute. This paper provides an insight into the larger research project, which also contains co-produced recommendations, which will be dis-seminated utilising an online open letter addressed to sports organisations, including NGBs. It is to note, we are not attempting to generalise or claim that everyone within the LGBTQ+ community experiences sports coaching interchangeably, and that further exploration into intersectionality in sports coaching would advance our understanding, particularly regarding intersecting identities which are underexplored.

Note

1. Loki stated 'man, but I don't really like using man or woman', thus this will be marked with an asterisk as a reminder that it differs to others who identify as men.

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