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Review

Reviewing evidence of LGBTQ+ discrimination and exclusion in sport

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ABSTRACT

Sport organisations continue to place a low priority on addressing the exclusion and discrimination experienced by LGBTQ+ people (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, questioning/queer, and sexual/gender diverse). It was previously thought this was due to a lack of quantitative evidence of a problem; however, over the past decade, a large body of quantitative research has been conducted, including two international studies, providing strong evidence that discriminatory behaviour remains common in sport and is harmful to this population. In this paper, the authors summarise existing quantitative evidence and consider why sport organisations continue to be slow to address LGBTQ+ exclusion. They argue sport management scholars are in a unique and privileged position to address current resistance to action and drive change through conducting research aimed at identifying pragmatic, practical approaches to end harmful discriminatory behaviours. Finally, the authors describe why such research has the potential to mitigate harm while also advancing the discipline in ways described as being needed by leading scholars.

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1. Introduction

Improving demographic diversity in recreational sport has been a major focus of sport policy makers over the last two decades (Cunningham, 2019b; Spaaij et al., 2018). Governments want traditionally underrepresented or marginalised groups to gain the psychosocial and health benefits that can come from sport participation (Bailey, 2006; Eime, Young, Harvey, Charity, & Payne, 2013). Recent funding announcements suggest a focus on diversity will continue after the COVID-19 pandemic (NZ Government, 2020; Sport England, 2020). Governments are a key source of revenue for many sport organisations, hence progressing the diversity agendas of policy makers has become a major focus of sport managers.

Action on diversity has been uneven, though there are positive signs of progress on increasing representation of women, people with disability, and people from underrepresented racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds (Cunningham, 2019b; Spaaij, Knoppers, & Jeanes, 2019). One area of diversity that has received limited funding and attention is addressing the needs of LGBTQ+ people (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, questioning, and those who are sexuality and gender diverse). Scholars who have reviewed inclusion and diversity programs implemented in sport settings have found few initiatives focused on

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the needs of this community (DeFoor, Stepleman, & Mann, 2018; Jeanes, Denison, Bevan, Lambert, & O'Connor, 2019; Marivoet, 2014).

Shaw (2019) describes the resistance of sport to the broader societal shifts related to LGBTQ+ people (e.g., same-sex marriage) as an “enigma” (p. 247) while Cunningham and Hussain (2020) suggested it is a “paradox” that “on the one hand, prejudice and discrimination limit the access and opportunities for LGBT athletes. On the other hand, an increasing number of (professional) teams are reaching out to the LGBT community” (p. 2) through events such as pride games or the creation of rainbow-themed merchandise.

Few researchers have examined why “sport as an institution has been relatively slow to embrace LGBT rights at the level of policy and practice compared with its responses to gender, race and disability” and how to motivate action in this area of diversity (Brackenridge, Aldred, Jarvis, Rivers, & Maddocks, 2008, p. 31). Robertson, Storr, Bakos, and O'Brien (2019) describe LGBTQ+ diversity as “absent” (p. 394) from recent discussions in the sport management literature around barriers and resistance to diversity. In this paper, we advocate for greater attention to the needs of the LGBTQ+ community by sport management scholars. We support our position with a narrative review of the quantitative evidence that discrimination and exclusion of LGBTQ+ people in sport remains common. We focus on quantitative data in light of the findings by Brackenridge et al. (2008), who conducted a comprehensive international literature and policy review and concluded a key reason LGBTQ+ inclusion was not a priority within the sport sector was that metric (i.e. ticket sales, points scored) or business-case driven sport practitioners consider there to be a lack of evidence, particularly quantitative evidence, that shows LGBTQ+ exclusion and homophobia/transphobia is commonplace. Brackenridge et al. (2008) also found sport managers were generally uncomfortable with dealing with issues related to sexuality and gender identity and concluded that the “lack of hard data/evidence as to the extent of any problems” (p. 10) made it possible for them to acknowledge there were issues related to the LGBTQ+ community in sport but ignore the need for action. The researchers found sport managers avoided responsibility for the discrimination that LGBTQ+ people experience by claiming they lacked the expertise to develop solutions. Brackenridge et al. (2008) acknowledge the contentious nature of what constitutes “hard” (p. 10) evidence; we have also detailed the limitations of the sport sector's reliance on statistical data to shape policy and practice (Jeanes & Lindsey, 2014). Although problematic, policy makers and practitioners across many areas continue to place greater value on large-scale quantitative data than they do to the in-depth understandings that qualitative data can provide (Piggin, Jackson, & Lewis, 2009). Whilst not supporting the prioritisation of quantitative data, we acknowledge that it reflects the perspectives of many practitioners and managers within the sporting sector.

The purpose of this paper therefore is two-fold. Our first aim is to review existing quantitative research which has examined the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in sport to determine whether there remains the lack of quantitative research described by Brackenridge et al. (2008). From this we consider whether insufficient evidence of a problem may remain a key factor explaining the apparent resistance within the sports sector to addressing the discrimination faced by the LGBTQ+ community, or whether other factors need to be considered. We conclude the paper by outlining some avenues for future research that can address some of the issues raised throughout the review.

2. Is sport becoming more inclusive for LGBTQ+ people?

In recent years there has been a rapid shift in societal attitudes toward gay people, which has led some to question whether a similar shift has occurred in sport settings (Cunningham, 2019a). We recently examined this question as part of a series of commissioned and requested literature reviews (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2019; Denison, 2019; Jeanes et al., 2019) and an ongoing systematic review (Denison, O'Brien, Jeanes, & Faulkner, 2019). As we detail in this paper, our reviews found many of the gaps in evidence identified by Brackenridge et al. have been addressed in the last decade by the “veritable explosion” (Fish, 2020, p. 3) of quantitative research on LGBTQ+ people made possible through the inclusion of sexuality and gender identity measures in ongoing population health surveys by governments and public health agencies. For example, the American Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) biennial youth surveillance surveys of high-school students now provide reliable data across a wide range of areas relevant to sport managers, including showing 14.6% of high-school aged young people identify as LGBQ (Kann et al., 2018), and 1.8% identify as transgender (Johns et al., 2019). However, it is difficult to determine if there have been improvements in attitudes toward LGBTQ+ people in sport settings similar to those that have been documented in wider society (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2019; Fetner, 2016). This is because the evidence of societal-level shifts comes from reviews of large, ongoing studies, conducted in multiple countries using consistent and/or validated measures over time (Fetner, 2016). No similar large-scale or comparable research has been conducted in sport.

Evidence from the relatively few studies that have measured attitudes toward LGBTQ+ people in sport using validated and comparable measures (Baiocco, Pistella, Salvati, Loverno, & Lucidi, 2018) suggests athletes, particularly males, are more likely than the general population to express homophobic attitudes (Anderson & Mowatt, 2013; Cunningham & Melton, 2012, 2014; Lee & Cunningham, 2014; McKinney & McAndrew, 2000; O'Brien, Shovelton, & Latner, 2013; Sartore-Baldwin & Cunningham, 2007; Worthen, 2014). Male athletes who play traditionally male sports, such as American football, seem especially likely to express prejudice towards gay people (Lee & Cunningham, 2016; Osborne & Wagner, 2007; Southall et al., 2011). Even with potential improvements in attitudes over time, researchers (Cunningham & Pickett, 2018; MacDonald, 2018) have recently found more than a quarter of male athletes report being uncomfortable with having a gay teammate and an even higher proportion would be uncomfortable with a trans teammate. Although less recent, Southall et al. (2011)

conducted research with teenage American football players in which more than half (57 %) said they would harass or reject a gay teammate. This finding is consistent with research by [Steinfeldt, Vaughan, LaFollette, and Steinfeldt \(2012\)](#) which also reported more than half (55 %) of American football players say they engage in homophobic bullying at school, and 11 % say they do this often or always. Evidence that a sizable proportion of athletes would be uncomfortable or actively reject/harass a gay or trans teammate is problematic in a sport context where players need to work cooperatively, spend a great deal of time together, and often share rooms when travelling.

Homophobic language (e.g., faggot, dyke) is also commonly used in sport by athletes, regardless of whether they also claim to have positive attitudes toward LGBTQ+ people ([Atteberry-Ash, Woodford, & Spectrum Center, 2018](#); [Digital, Culture, Media, Culture, and Sport Committee, 2017](#); [Greene, 2010](#)). Researchers have found more than half of male athletes self-report recently (e.g., last two weeks) using homophobic slurs (e.g., fag) and three-fourths have heard their teammates use this language ([Denison & Toole, 2020](#); [Denison, O'Brien, Jeanes, & Faulkner, 2018](#); [Greene, 2010](#); [Harlequin, 2020](#); [MacDonald, 2018](#)). [Southall, Nagel, Anderson, Polite, and Southall \(2009\)](#) found male athletes are more likely than females to use this language (70.8 % vs. 37 %). Evidence that homophobic slurs continue to be used frequently in sport highlights an important limitation in studies that measure attitudes and do not also examine behaviours related to LGBTQ+ sport discrimination. It is not uncommon to find disconnects between what people say and what they actually do in relation to prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behaviours ([Lapiere, 1934](#); [Zitek & Hebl, 2007](#)). In community sport settings, [Spaaij et al. \(2019\)](#) have found people claim to be inclusive and accepting of diverse groups to conform to prevailing social norms that value diversity, and including LGBTQ+ people, but they do not also change their exclusionary or discriminatory behaviours. This may be shown by [Magrath's \(2017\)](#) study of teenage football (soccer) players in the UK; he found two-thirds self-reported regularly using homophobic language with teammates despite expressing inclusive attitudes (e.g., support same-sex marriage) towards gay people. The athletes defended their use of slurs (e.g., fag) as normal banter and humour in sport which they perceived to be harmless because they believed they did not have any gay teammates. The athletes in [Magrath's](#) study seemed unaware that LGBTQ+ athletes try to hide their sexuality or gender identity because homophobic and transphobic language makes them feel unwelcome ([Denison & Kitchen, 2015](#); [Greenspan, Griffith, Hayes, & Murtagh, 2019](#); [Pistella et al., 2020](#)).

3. Experiences of LGBTQ+ people in sport

Studies conducted by researchers in a wide-range of sport settings now provide evidence that LGBTQ+ people regularly experience discrimination and exclusion in sport ([Baiocco, Pistella, Salvati, Ioverno, & Lucidi, 2018](#); [Brackenridge, Rivers, Gough, & Llewellyn, 2007](#); [Cunningham, Pickett, Melton, Lee, & Miner, 2014](#); [Demers, 2017](#); [Englefield, Cunningham, Mahoney, Stone, & Torrance, 2016](#); [GLSEN, 2013](#); [Greenspan, Griffith, Hayes et al., 2019](#); [Kokkonen, 2019](#); [Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018](#); [Kulick, Wernick, Espinoza, Newman, & Dessel, 2019](#); [Mumberson, 2014](#); [Rivers, 2011](#); [Smith, Cuthbertson, & Gale, 2012](#); [Stonewall, 2009, 2012](#); [Storr, Sullivan, Symons, Spaaij, & Sbaraglia, 2017](#); [Symons, O'Sullivan, & Polman, 2016](#); [Symons, Sbaraglia, Hillier, & Mitchell, 2010](#)). The most comprehensive data comes from two international studies (34 countries) with a combined sample of over 12,000 participants. The most recent study ([Menzel, Braumuller, & Hartmann-Tews, 2019](#)) was the first to recruit LGBTQ+ participants from all EU countries ($N = 5524$) and the first to recruit a large international sample of trans participants (16.7 % of the overall sample). [Menzel et al.](#) reported 82 % of participants had witnessed homophobic or transphobic language in sport in the last six months and 90 % considered homophobia and transphobia to be a current problem in sport settings. Trans women (46.2 %) were the most likely to report they had been the victim of direct discrimination in the last year.

The study by [Menzel et al. \(2019\)](#) replicated many of the findings of earlier research ([Denison & Kitchen, 2015](#)) that focused on the sport experiences of LGB people ($N = 7000$) from six countries (USA, Canada, UK, Ireland, NZ, Australia). [Denison and Kitchen \(2015\)](#) also found 82 % of their participants had witnessed or experienced homophobic behaviour in sport, including verbal insults and slurs, bullying, physical assaults, and threats of violence. Most gay and bisexual males (71 %) and half (50 %) of gay and bisexual females in their study believed homophobia to be more common in team sporting environments than in general society, and only 1 % of participants believed LGB people are completely accepted in sport environments. Data from [Denison and Kitchen's](#) study also suggest youth sport environments are particularly problematic, for example, most participants (73 %), including those under the age of 20 at the time of the study, said it is not safe for LGB youth to come out to their teammates. Indeed, a recent secondary analysis of the data from their study found young LGB participants who came out to their teammates were significantly more likely to report they had been the target of homophobic abuse than those who remained in the closet ([Denison, Jeanes, Faulkner, & O'Brien, 2020](#)). The findings of large-scale studies are consistent with studies by researchers of young people in Canada ([Morrison, Jewell, McCutcheon, & Cochrane, 2014](#)) and Australia ([Symons, Sullivan, Andersen, & Polman, 2014](#)) who have found most (89–98.4 %) LGBTQ+ students have heard homophobic language in school sport and half (47 %–59 %) report this behaviour occurs frequently or often. LGBTQ+ youth also consistently identify sport environments as the school settings they are most likely to feel unsafe ([Kosciw et al., 2018](#)) and most coaches and physical education teachers (92.7 %) report they have heard homophobic language being used by students toward other students ([Piedra, Ramirez-Macias, Ries, Rodriguez-Sanchez, & Phipps, 2016](#)).

Taken together, the available quantitative evidence suggests discrimination and homophobia continues to be an issue within sports contexts. The findings by researchers using quantitative methods reflect and are consistent with a rich and detailed range of recent studies by researchers who have examined homophobia, transphobia, and the discrimination

experienced by LGBTQ+ people in sport from a qualitative perspective (Caudwell, 2011, 2014; Greenspan, Griffith, Hayes et al., 2019; Hargie, Mitchell, & Somerville, 2017; Melton & Cunningham, 2012; Petty & Trussell, 2018; Sartore-Baldwin, 2012). This is further illustrated by consistency with the findings of researchers who have reviewed and synthesised the available qualitative evidence (Kavoura & Kokkonen, 2020; Landi, Flory, Safron, & Marttinen, 2020; Perez-Samaniego, Fuentes-Miguel, Pereira-García, López-Cañada, & Devís-Devís, 2019).

We recognise, however, that it is important to acknowledge there is a body of research that suggests homophobia is decreasing and no longer such a prominent issue within sport (E. Anderson, Magrath, & Bullingham, 2016; Gaston, Magrath, & Anderson, 2018; Magrath, Anderson, & Roberts, 2015). Although it is reasonable to assume that attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people are improving in sport settings, particularly amongst young people, a large and diverse body of quantitative and qualitative research has found LGBTQ+ people continue to experience discrimination and exclusion in sport settings. We now consider the implications of homophobic, transphobic and discriminatory behaviours in sport on LGBTQ+ participants.

4. Impact of stigma and discriminatory language in sport

Greenspan, Griffith, and Watson (2019) recently conducted a systematic review of research on LGBTQ+ youth in sport and concluded sport settings are a prime community setting for this population to experience discrimination and described the harm as a “critical public health concern” (Greenspan, Griffith, and Watson, 2019, p. 170). Their conclusions are supported by a recent position statement (Chang et al., 2020) from the American Medical Society for Sports Medicine which described good and consistent evidence supporting the need to address LGBTQ+ discrimination and exclusion in sport due to the detriment it causes to the mental and physical health of this population. The concerns of public health officials and doctors are based on evidence from multiple systematic reviews (Fedewa & Ahn, 2011; Marshal et al., 2011; Russell & Fish, 2016) and recent health-focused research conducted in sport (Blais, Bergeron, Duford, Boislard, & Hébert, 2015; DeFoor et al., 2018; Greenspan, Griffith, Hayes et al., 2019; Herrick & Duncan, 2018). Researchers consistently find discrimination to be a key risk factor for LGBTQ+ youth experiencing moderate-severe depression, abusing alcohol or drugs, self-harming, or attempting suicide (Russell & Fish, 2016). For example, Ybarra, Mitchell, Kosciw, and Korchmaros (2015) found victims of sexuality-based bullying to be five times more likely than non-victimised youth to report suicide ideation (wishing they were dead for at least a day in the last week). The CDC has found LGB youth (Kann et al., 2018) report attempting suicide in the past year at rates more than four-times higher than heterosexual youth (5.4 % vs. 23 %) while trans youth (Johns et al., 2019) report attempting suicide at rates more than six-times higher than cisgender youth (5.5 % vs. 34.6 %). Evidence that community exposure to discriminatory behaviours is harmful to this population has led policy makers (Digital, Culture, Media, Culture, & Sport Committee, 2017), public health officials (Blais et al., 2015; CDC, 2018) and United Nations Agencies (United Nations Human Rights Commission, 2015) to call for coordinated and concerted efforts to identify ways to end this behaviour.

Discriminatory behaviours also deter LGBTQ+ youth from playing sport. Greenspan, Griffith, and Watson (2019) found evidence is stronger for males than it is for females and trans people, concluding, there is now “ample data to suggest the prejudicial nature (of sport environments) can serve as a deterrent for athletic participation for gay males, in particular, as this population appears to be targeted harshly” (p. 181–182). Their conclusions are supported by recent population studies by the CDC (Kann et al., 2016, 2018), and by public health researchers in Canada who have found young gay males play team sports at half the rate (32.8 % vs. 67.6 %) of peers (Doull, Watson, Smith, Homma, & Saewyc, 2018). The CDC (Kann et al., 2018) reports lesbian (51.7 %) and bisexual (38.1 %) girls also play team sports at lower rates than their heterosexual peers (61.2 %), but the impacts of sexuality-based discrimination is less clear because sexist and homophobic discrimination is intertwined for females in sport (Krane, 1997; Robertson et al., 2019; Storr et al., 2017; Symons et al., 2016).

For women and girls, the social processes affecting sport participation can become conflated and challenging to disentangle (Sartore-Baldwin & Cunningham, 2009). There is also evidence that women who play traditionally male sports are often assumed to be lesbians and experience discrimination regardless of their sexuality (Robertson et al., 2019; Sartore-Baldwin & Cunningham, 2009; Storr et al., 2017). Adding to the complexity is evidence that female sport participation is impacted by systemic inequality, which may be linked to homophobic attitudes, such as lower rates of funding and less media coverage (Brackenridge et al., 2007; Hemphill & Symons, 2009; Sartore-Baldwin & Cunningham, 2009).

Less quantitative evidence is available on the impact of discrimination on sport participation for trans and gender diverse youth because population studies have only recently begun asking about gender identity. However, evidence from recent literature and systematic reviews (Cunningham, Buzuvis, & Mosier, 2018; Greenspan, Griffith, Hayes et al., 2019; Herrick & Duncan, 2018; Jones, Arcelus, Bouman, & Haycraft, 2017; Perez-Samaniego et al., 2019) suggests the primary barrier to sport participation for trans people is structural or institutional, rather than interpersonal forms of discrimination. This includes government or sport governing body sanctioned policies which are explicitly, and legally, exclusionary. Rankin and Beemyn (2012) conducted a large study of trans youth ($N = 3500$) in which participants felt excluded from almost all sport settings due to the typical binary gender divisions. Similarly, Menzel et al. (2019) found 62 % of trans participants who had never participated in sport outside of physical education class said this was due to discomfort related to their gender identity.

5. Response from sport organisations and managers

As the review has highlighted, there is now a wide body of quantitative research providing evidence that LGBTQ+ people experience discrimination in sport and this has a range of negative impacts on their mental and physical health. Brackenridge

et al. (2008) hypothesised this type of evidence was key to driving action by sport policy makers and managers; however, research by Shaw (2019) suggests evidence of the problem may not be enough to drive change. Shaw studied a task force of sport managers from the five largest New Zealand (NZ) sports (rugby, cricket, football, netball, hockey) created in response to social (media) and political (a lesbian parliamentarian) pressure to address homophobic behaviour. This followed the release of the study by Denison and Kitchen (2015) who found homophobic behaviour was common in NZ sport. Shaw's descriptions of the response of sport managers to LGBTQ+ inclusion are strikingly similar to those of Brackenridge et al. (2008) a decade earlier. For example, some sport managers on the task force refused to accept there was a problem, though most acknowledged solutions were needed, but felt addressing LGBTQ+ inclusion was complex and established themselves as "inexpert" around how to move forward (pg. 254). Shaw describes this as a form of resistance to this area of diversity because acknowledging the need for solutions, but taking a position of "unknowing" allowed the task force members to symbolically be "seen to be doing something positive; however, by establishing a lack of knowledge in the area, they are also able to avoid final responsibility for pursuing change" (pg. 254). Ultimately, the task force did not complete its assignment. Instead of developing targeted and unified approaches to address homophobic behaviour, the members decided they would instead take a broad diversity approach that allowed them to include LGBTQ+ people under the umbrella of their organisation's work across traditional areas of diversity (e.g., race, women, and disability). This is illustrated by the taskforce's #sportforeveryone (2018) website which appears to be its only output, and has an about section that makes no mention of LGBTQ+ people. Shaw concluded the taskforce members took this approach because they "were more comfortable picking a target group that suited their organisational mission or values, rather than address the insidious problem of homophobia in sport" (p. 255).

Whilst there is limited research explicitly examining the potential reasons for the lack of engagement by sport policy makers and practitioners in LGBTQ+ inclusion found by Shaw (2019) and researchers in other countries (Brackenridge et al., 2007; Chang et al., 2020; DeFoor et al., 2018; Jeanes et al., 2019; Marivoet, 2014; Phipps, 2020), a number of studies have examined diversity work within sport more broadly. Researchers have found there is general resistance by the sports sector to engage with diversity and their findings may point to theoretical understandings of why LGBTQ+ inclusion is largely ignored. The work of Spaaij et al. (2014, 2018) draws on the understanding that diversity work is generally driven by either a social justice perspective (driven by a rights based belief that everyone should have access to economic, cultural, and social goods) or a business case (diversity is good for business and supporting diversity will equate to economic gain). Their research highlights that many sports providers are driven by a business case in their decision to embrace particular forms of diversity; for example, one sport, recognising their membership base was reducing considerably targeted their promotion work at newly arrived multicultural communities who they considered were a new market to increase their membership base (Spaaij et al., 2014). This approach was less focused on supporting the inclusion of diverse populations within sport than on ensuring survival. The business case is inherent in much of the diversity work within sport that has looked to increase the numbers of women participating, with recognition that economically it does not make sense to ignore half the population (Adriaanse & Schofield, 2014). Drawing on the conclusions of these studies, that diversity work in sport is largely driven by a business rather than a social justice framework, the LGBTQ+ community has potentially been disadvantaged by not being perceived to be an important market or one that will yield a significant economic return for sports and therefore not considered to be a worthwhile investment, at least from a participation point of view. This underscores the "paradox" described by Cunningham and Hussain (2020, p. 2) in that sport organisations apparently see little value in addressing LGBTQ+ discrimination while at the same time professional organisations, such as the National Hockey League and the Australian Football League, increasingly target LGBTQ+ consumers (e.g., pride games, rainbow merchandise) (Heraux, 2019). Sport organisations are often praised for this work and some scholars also suggest these actions are a sign of progress in these sports on LGBTQ+ diversity (Mortazavi, 2017). It is noteworthy, however, that the NHL has held widely publicised pride games for nearly a decade yet homophobic language remains common in ice hockey (Denison & Toole, 2020) and this behaviour seems to be unsanctioned by officials (MacDonald, 2016, 2018). LGBTQ+ people are also less visible in hockey than in other sports which is illustrated by the NHL being the only major North American sporting league to never have a male player (current or retired) come out as LGBTQ+ (Heraux, 2019). Mumcu and Lough (2017) suggest the pro-LGBTQ+ activities by these professional sport teams are designed primarily to attract a cohort of fans who "have become an important target market for all industries due to large amounts of disposable income" (p. 43).

The lack of engagement by governments on LGBTQ+ inclusion would also contribute to sport managers seeing little commercial value in engaging in this area of diversity. For example, we have identified nearly a dozen studies conducted in Australia (Jeanes et al., 2019) which provide local evidence of the need for action. Despite this evidence, LGBTQ+ populations continue to be omitted from multi-year government sport participation strategies (Sport Australia, 2018; Victoria State Government, 2017). This omission sends a powerful message to sport managers as these documents provide guidance around where to focus their energy to maximise government funding opportunities. This is further underscored by Shaw's study (2019) which found some sport managers embraced social justice arguments for action on LGBTQ+ diversity but were "unable to prioritise this work in a system that is governed by a focus on funded priorities" set primarily by Sport NZ (p. 260). Shaw suggests the lack of engagement and funding support from sport policy makers in NZ made it inevitable the work of the task force would fall "in on itself" (p. 260).

Spaaij et al. (2018) have also drawn on the work of Sara Ahmed (2012) to consider resistance to diversity work within the sports sector. Ahmed's work can provide further insights into the lack of engagement by sports organisations. Ahmed (2012, 2017) outlines the importance of diversity champions in advocating and driving organisational change typically using their influence and a mix of both social justice and business arguments. Research by Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) also highlights

the importance and power of champions in driving commitment by peers, and thus their organisations, to diversity agendas. Retired male athletes are typically the leaders of sport and thus, they are also influential champions or resisters of diversity activities (Melton & Cunningham, 2014). As previously discussed, male athletes appear to be more likely than the general population to express prejudice toward gay people (O'Brien et al., 2013; Osborne & Wagner, 2007; Worthen, 2014) and research suggests prejudice is the strongest predictor of whether a person will be a diversity champion or resister (Cunningham & Sartore, 2010). It is therefore reasonable to suspect that elevated levels of prejudice amongst sport leaders may be a key reason this area of diversity hits a "brick wall," which is a figurative concept Ahmed (2012) uses to describe the ongoing resistance diversity workers face from organisations to make changes that will embrace different dimensions of diversity.

Ahmed (2012) also refers to the concept of "non-performative speech acts" (p. 117) as a key form and useful indicator of resistance to an area of diversity. Just like individual athletes, at a macro level, sport organisations also conform to societal norms around diversity and seem to embrace the concept of diversity within their rhetoric, such as in policies, mission statements, or the verbal claims of leaders, however these are not reinforced by specific actions that demonstrate an actual embrace of and commitment to diversity. Spaaij et al. (2019) suggest this occurs within community sports contexts with many sports providers claiming that they are inclusive and open for all but refuse to change particular practices that can result in othering and excluding certain groups. Trussell, Kovac, and Apgar (2018) provide specific LGBTQ+ examples of this, where sports clubs considered they were inclusive of diverse sexualities and genders but have not changed practices, such as altering registration forms containing heteronormative descriptors that reinforced the gender binary i.e. male/female boxes and for young people, requesting details for mothers and fathers. Brackenridge et al. (2008) and Shaw (2019) provide evidence of this occurring among sport managers who suggest they address LGBTQ+ diversity as "part of their overall equalities approach (yet offering nothing whatsoever to evidence this claim)" (Brackenridge et al., 2008; p. 51). Storr, Parry, and Kavanagh (2018) suggests the highly publicised commitments by sport leaders to "eliminate" (Mulvenney, 2014; online) or "stamp out" homophobia (Digital, Culture, Media, Culture, and Sport Committee, 2017, p. 6; Home Office, 2011) are examples of non-performative speech acts because there is little evidence of subsequent action or change in the discrimination experienced by LGBTQ+ people.

6. The role of sport management scholars

There is no longer the lack of "hard evidence/data" that LGBTQ+ people experience discrimination in sport that Brackenridge et al. (2008) suggested was a key barrier to action. It seems other factors likely explain the resistance by sport managers to engage with this area of diversity. In this paper we have suggested some factors that could be relevant to explain this unique resistance but future research will be needed to confirm whether these are actual barriers to progress. Without a doubt LGBTQ+ inclusion is complex. Although it is clear that resistance can be found in the claims by some sport managers that they lack the expertise to develop their own solutions in this area, the study by Shaw (2019) and our own work with sport managers (Denison, O'Brien, Jeanes, & Faulkner, 2019; Spaaij et al., 2019) has found there are some who legitimately want to engage in this area of diversity but they are uncertain on how to move forward. There is little research that they can use to guide the creation of evidence-based and validated programs, policies, or interventions. This is illustrated by the results of a comprehensive review by Bartos (2016) and Bartos, Berger, and Hegarty (2014) of published and unpublished studies which have been conducted to evaluate the effect of interventions designed to address homophobic attitudes and behaviour in a wide range of social settings (e.g., schools, military, hospitals, construction sites). The reviewers found no studies conducted in sport settings. The need to address the gap in solution-focused research has been described as critical (Greenspan, Griffith, Hayes et al., 2019) in light of the breadth of evidence of a range of negative health and psychosocial outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth associated with experiences of discrimination in sport. Much of this evidence has been generated by public health scholars who say "a concerted effort is needed to develop large-scale, empirically driven, and rigorously tested strategies" to mitigate this harm (Fish, 2020, p. 4). We urge sport management scholars to engage with this issue because they are in an ideal, unique, and privileged position to lead these research efforts due to their access to sport, and specialised knowledge of the unique challenges of implementing sustainable programs in sport settings (Spaaij et al., 2019). Unlike public health researchers, sport scholars are also more likely to know how to navigate typically chaotic, loosely organised, volunteer driven, and poorly resourced sport environments.

Conducting such research has the potential to improve the lives of LGBTQ+ people and it also aligns with the research agendas proposed by leading scholars (Chalip, 2006; Cunningham, 2014; Doherty, 2013a; Frisby, 2005; Shaw & Frisby, 2006). For example, Chalip (2006) and Doherty (2013a) call on sport management scholars to engage with scholars and practitioners across a wide range of disciplines, such as those in public health. Shaw and Frisby (2006) suggest Meyerson and Kolb's (2009) for critical scholars to "get out of the arm chair" (p. 554) can be applied to research in sport settings, where there is a need for scholars to put a greater focus on working collaboratively on diversity issues with engaged sport organisations. Similarly, Fink (2016) suggests sport scholars "must begin to move away from merely "admiring the problem" and toward the discovery of changes that positively transform sport organisations" (p. 5). Robertson et al. (2019) provide a useful case study of the benefits of such an approach. These researchers have worked closely with Cricket governing bodies in Australia over the past five years providing them with research and evidence to inform practice and collaborating on the creation of solutions (Storr et al., 2017). This has led to notable changes and progress, including Cricket Australia becoming the first national sport governing body in Australia to issue comprehensive guidelines for trans inclusion. This rare example

of leadership by a sport organisation highlights how collaboration between scholars and sport managers can help sport organisations engage with this area of diversity.

Finally, scholars have called for the development of new, sport-specific theories that align with the “relevant issues and challenges in the field” (Doherty, 2013b, p. 8) and are therefore more likely to be applied and used by sport practitioners and also by scholars in other disciplines. Some suggest this is important to advance and develop the field (Chalip, 2006; Doherty, 2013b). Other researchers have also identified the need to validate theoretical models, derived from other disciplines, developed to understand diversity processes at sport organisations (e.g., Cunningham, 2009; Robertson et al., 2019; Shaw & Frisby, 2006). Research on LGBTQ+ sport inclusion could create an opportunity to develop or test and validate theories around the underlying causes of homophobic, heteronormative, and sexist behaviours in sport. Theories used to develop effective methods to change discriminatory behaviours in sport could then be of great utility to scholars working in other settings where homophobic and transphobic behaviours remain common (e.g., police forces).

7. Implications and recommendations

Consistent evidence that LGBTQ+ people continue to experience discrimination and exclusion in sport supports the need identified by UN agencies, public health agencies, and scholars for urgent, collaborative, solution-focused research to identify ways to stop discriminatory behaviours and mitigate any harm being caused to members of this population. However, the primary barrier to action seems to be a lack of engagement in this area of diversity by government policy makers who play a powerful role in setting the agendas and focus of sport managers. We hope the diverse range of quantitative research reviewed in this paper is useful to practitioners and advocates in lobbying for greater attention by governments and sport managers to this area of diversity. We also hope this paper makes an important contribution to the continuing debates among scholars surrounding the persistence of homophobia, transphobia and exclusionary behaviours in sport contexts. Whilst there is a counter narrative that sport is now a welcoming and inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ people (Anderson et al., 2016; Gaston et al., 2018; Magrath, 2017), the current evidence, including large-scale, quantitative, international research with LGBTQ+ people, largely supports Shaw’s (2019) description that “sport is inherently homophobic” (p. 247) and Sartore-Baldwin’s (2013) description of sport as a “heterosexist institution” (p. 129) which continues to be used to reinforce traditional gender roles and binaries.

Future research will need to address the gaps in the literature in two areas. The first is investigating and identifying effective methods to overcome resistance by government policy makers and sport managers to engage in LGBTQ+ sport diversity. We need to identify the role of scholars in this process and how they can support and collaborate with sport managers who are legitimately unsure of how to navigate the complexity of LGBTQ+ diversity or how to overcome resistance and become much-needed champions within their sector (Cunningham & Sartore, 2010). It could be useful to start by building on the work of Storr et al. (2018) who examined the actions that followed public commitments of sport leaders to address homophobia in Australia (Mulvenney, 2014). Similar commitments have been made in the United States (Buzinski, 2013; Hine, 2016; Portwood, 2015), UK (Home Office, 2011), Canada (Bucholtz, 2016), and New Zealand (New Zealand Herald, 2017). It is important to understand the specific barriers to meaningful action.

The second gap in the literature that needs to be addressed comes from the lack of research focused on identifying practical, pragmatic, and scalable solutions to stop the discrimination and exclusion of LGBTQ+ people in sport. Scholars (Chang et al., 2020; Kulick et al., 2019) often suggest a need for educational resources or training programs, yet over the last two-decades, dozens of online and printed educational programs, resources, and manuals on LGBTQ+ inclusion and diversity have been created (e.g., Australian Sports Commission, 2000; Birch-Jones, 2014; Fletcher, 2015; Griffin, Perrotti, Priest, & Muska, 2002; Jehu, 2016; Stonewall, 2018). There is no published evidence that creating these resources has improved the sport experiences of LGBTQ+ people or that they are valued and used by sport managers and coaches. The task force members in Shaw’s (2019) study had access to a range of online and printed educational resources/manuals yet still said they lacked expertise to develop solutions. It would be prudent to conduct rigorous evaluations of existing materials before additional charitable or public funds are used to develop additional training resources. Building on this, many of the educational resources are based on assumptions of the underlying factors supporting discrimination and exclusion (e.g., prejudice). Studies are needed to confirm the contextual and psychosocial factors theorised (Cunningham et al., 2018; Hemphill & Symons, 2009; Sartore-Baldwin & Cunningham, 2009) to underpin discrimination experienced by LGBTQ+ people (e.g., prejudice, heteronormativity, gender norms) and whether altering these factors actually improves sport experiences for LGBTQ+ people. Research is also needed to understand the nuances and intersections (where appropriate) in the forms of discrimination between different sexualities and gender identities (Sartore-Baldwin, 2013). Broad-brush, or “one size fits all” (Anderson, 2017, p. 38) approaches have proven ineffective in driving diversity changes in other settings (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016, 2017) and may confound and ignore the unique challenges, needs, and factors underpinning discrimination, stigma, and exclusion of the subgroups of the LGBTQ+ community (Phipps, 2020; Worthen, 2013). Intersectionality is an important theoretical concept but in practice, tailored approaches will likely be needed – put simply: stopping homophobic language by teenage athletes will likely require a very different approach than that used to stop the state-sanctioned exclusion of trans people.

A final area of research which holds promise is the growing body of evidence that suggests LGBTQ+ diversity may have direct benefits to the overall success of sport teams and improve the experiences of everyone in sport settings (Cunningham, 2011; Cunningham & Hussain, 2020; Cunningham & Nite, 2020). Much of this evidence comes from research conducted in

American university sport settings. Expanding this research and generating evidence from a wider range of sport settings could be a useful approach to help overcome any perceptions of sport managers that there is little commercial benefit to act on the discrimination experienced by LGBTQ+ people.

We hope this paper has provided a useful overview of the body of quantitative evidence that can be used as a foundation to support teaching, advocacy, and solution-focused research by scholars across all fields and disciplines.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors report no declarations of interest.

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