

Sport Media Vectors

Digitization, Expanding Audiences, and the Globalization of Live Sport

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Downloaded by Erik Denison on Thu Aug 20 2020 at 14:47:57 PM CDT

 COMMON
GROUND

 Sport & Society

Do LGBT Pride Games Stop Homophobic Language in Sport?

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INTRODUCTION

Ice hockey, as a sport, has received praise for its efforts to promote the inclusion of gay and bisexual men, and more recently, gay, and bisexual women and transgender people (Heraux 2019). For example, the National Hockey League (NHL) was the first professional league to prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation in its collective bargaining agreement with players (Mortazavi 2017). The sport also pioneered the ‘pride game’ concept (also sometimes called pride nights), which are regularly scheduled, rainbow-themed games held to promote the inclusion of LGBT people in sport. Despite these efforts, the lack of openly gay professional hockey players, and evidence that homophobic language remains common in the sport, suggests approaches being used may need to be reconsidered. This chapter examines whether pride games, which have been adopted globally, are an effective way to drive change.

The Global Adoption of Pride Games

On October 19, 2013, the Florida Panthers were the first professional hockey team (and potentially sport team) to hold a pride game.⁵⁷ Since then, the games have been adopted by hockey teams globally, including in Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), and all NHL teams. The games, and approach used by the NHL, have also been adopted by a wide range of other sport teams and leagues, including Major and Minor League Baseball (MLB/MiLB), Major League Soccer (MLS), the Super and the Premier Leagues (Rugby League/Rugby Union), Australian Football League (AFL), and the Big Bash League (cricket).

⁵⁷ Information provided by Glenn Witman via email on 31 December 2019. Glenn, an openly gay amateur hockey player, co-founded You Can Play and was invited to ‘drop the puck’ to start the Panthers’ game.

Pride games have proven to be lucrative for the teams that hold them, attracting new fans and driving merchandise sales. For example, last year's LA Dodgers (baseball) pride game was the team's most attended game in the past seven years (Zeigler 2019). In the UK, the Harlequins held the first professional-level pride game in rugby union, which was the club's highest attended home game despite that fact fans had to brave pouring rain on the day as winter storm "Dennis" caused major flooding and shut down trains and roads (Holmes 2020).

The NHL's approach to pride games has been adopted around the world, however, it remains unclear whether these events actually help to make sport more inclusive for LGBT people. No published research has evaluated the impact of pride games on the use of homophobic language in sport, or attitudes toward members of this community. Pride games are also a unique, unstudied, approach to prejudice-reduction, in that they use sport events as a vehicle to communicate pro-LGBT messages, and showcase the stories of LGBT athletes, to a very large, invested audience at the games or watching on television. Although the impact of hockey's pride games has not been specifically studied, parasocial contact theory suggests the events could be effective (Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 2005). Research has found exposure to gay people and exposure to pro-gay messaging through mass-media channels (parasocial contact), such as through watching sitcoms like *Will & Grace*, is associated with positive attitudes toward gay people and may even influence positive behaviours, such as voting for same-sex marriage (Bartos, Berger, and Hegarty 2014; Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 2006). Research is needed to investigate whether pride games, have a similar effect.

This chapter briefly reviews the history of pride games and recent, quantitative evidence supporting their need. We then share the results of a cross-sectional study conducted with all eight semi-professional teams playing in the Australian Ice Hockey League (AIHL). The study is the first population study of all teams in a national league on LGBT issues. We investigated whether there were differences between hockey teams which have held pride games, and those which have not, in the number of openly gay or bisexual male athletes, the use of homophobic slurs, and player attitudes toward gay people. The study data is contributing to a larger piece of research being conducted across multiple sports and countries, examining the psychosocial and contextual factors supporting the use of homophobic language in male team sport (Harlequin FC 2020; Jeanes et al. 2019). This research responds to the need for pragmatic, evidence-based intervention approaches that can be used to reduce harm to LGBT people from homophobic behaviour in sport⁵⁸ (Brackenridge et al. 2007; Greenspan et al. 2019; Greenspan, Griffith, and Watson 2019).

⁵⁸ Studies have found transgender people are often the target of homophobic behaviour due to sexuality and gender identity being confounded, particularly by young people.

Where Are the Gay Hockey Players?

In the decades since 1975, the year David Kopay (NFL) became the first professional male athlete to come out as gay, countless media stories have been written asking why so few male athletes have followed him out of the closet (Mortino 2017). At time of writing, there are no openly gay professional hockey players in North America, and the NHL is the only major North American sporting league to never have a current, or retired, player come out⁵⁹ (Murphy 2018). There is just one gay male currently playing professional team sport (soccer) in North America, and none in Australia, or New Zealand (Ennis 2020). In Europe, there are a few more openly gay and bisexual male athletes, including rugby league player Keegan Hurst, and cricketer Steven Davies. Europe is also home to the first openly bisexual professional hockey player. Zach Sullivan, who plays for the Elite Ice Hockey League's Manchester Storm. He came out as bisexual in January 2020, a few days before his team hosted its inaugural pride game.

The media typically focus attention on the lack of gay hockey players at the elite levels of sport, however, scholars suggest the problem begins at the junior levels (Brackenridge et al. 2007; Greenspan, Griffith, and Watson 2019). Evidence of this in hockey comes from research by MacDonald (2016, 2018), which involved interviews and surveys with nearly 100 Canadian teenage ice hockey players, none of whom identified as gay or bisexual, from six teams. It is statistically improbable that none of these players were gay or bisexual. Population studies of high school students by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report nearly 15% of high-school aged young people identify as non-heterosexual (Kann et al. 2018).

MacDonald suggests it is more likely that the gay or bisexual hockey players on these teams felt the need to hide their sexuality given most of their teammates (65%) *self-reported* using homophobic language regularly and one in four (26%) players said they would not be comfortable with having a gay teammate. Studies have found hearing homophobic language makes gay and bisexual youth feel unsafe, leading them to try to hide their sexuality from others (Brackenridge et al. 2007; Greenspan, Griffith, and Watson 2019), The results of the Canadian hockey team study are particularly concerning because Canada is a progressive country on LGBT issues (Rose 2012), and the country's NHL teams have a long history of pro-LGBT activities, including hosting pride games (National Hockey League 2019b).

Haven't Homophobic Attitudes in Sport Improved in Recent Years?

Some gender scholars have suggested attitudes toward gay people have improved in recent years among male athletes, as they have in wider society, including describing male team sport settings as "welcoming and inclusive" for sexual minorities (Magrath

⁵⁹ Semi-professional players that have come out, including Ontario's Brock McGillis, have not been selected to play by NHL teams.

2017, 109). It is reasonable to suspect attitudes are improving in sport, as they are in other settings, however, the evidence they use to support their conclusions comes primarily from qualitative studies, with heterosexual athletes, living in progressive areas (Melton and Cunningham 2014). These conclusions are challenged by quantitative research with LGBT athletes, as well as heterosexual athletes (Southall et al. 2011), such as MacDonald's (2018) hockey study, which find a sizeable proportion of male athletes say they would be unwelcoming to a gay teammate. This is problematic in team sport environments where athletes spend many hours together.

There is also evidence that heterosexual male athletes, particularly those who play traditionally male sports (e.g., ice hockey) are more likely than female athletes and the general population to express homophobic attitudes, as measured by validated scales that ask participants if they agree with statements such as 'male homosexuals are disgusting' (O'Brien, Shovelton, and Latner 2013; Worthen 2014). Research has also found athletes who claim to have 'inclusive' attitudes toward gay people still self-report using homophobic language regularly, which is harmful to gay and bisexual people (Magrath 2017; MacDonald 2018).

The findings of studies with heterosexual athletes are consistent with data from two large international studies with LGBT participants. The most recent (Menzel, Braumuller, and Harmann-Tews 2019) investigated the sport experiences of LGBT people from all EU countries (N = 5524) and found 82 percent of participants had witnessed homophobic or transphobic language in sport in the last six months, and nearly all (90%) described homophobia and transphobia in sport as a "current problem" that needs to be addressed. This study replicated many of the findings of an earlier (N = 7000) international study (Denison and Kitchen 2015), which focused on the sport experiences of LGB people in six countries (USA, Canada, UK, Ireland, NZ, Australia) and also found most (82%) LGB participants had witnessed or experienced homophobic behaviour in sport. The study also reported most gay and bisexual male participants (71%) believed homophobia is more common in team sporting environments than general society, and most (73%) described sport as unsafe and unwelcoming for LGB youth. These findings contribute to a growing body of evidence that homophobic behaviour in sport appears to be particularly harmful to LGBT youth.

Impact of Homophobic Language

A recent systematic review of research examining the impact of discriminatory behaviours in sport on LGBT youth described the harm being caused as a "critical public health issue" (Greenspan, Griffith, and Watson 2019, 170). This description is consistent with the conclusions of a Parliamentary Inquiry into homophobia in sport in the UK which expressed "serious concerns" about the mental and physical health impacts of this language on LGBT young people (Digital, Culture, Media, Culture, and Sport Committee, 2017, p. 9). These conclusions reflect strong evidence that being the victim of discrimination, or even being exposed to homophobic language

being used by one's peers, increases the risk a young LGBT person will self-harm, attempt suicide, or experience clinical depression or anxiety (Fedewa and Ahn 2011; Greenspan, Griffith, and Watson 2019; Herrick and Duncan 2018; Russell and Fish 2016).

There is evidence that the frequent use of homophobic language in sport also deters gay and bisexual males from participation; the review by Greenspan and colleagues (2019) concluded, "there is 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" (Greenspan, Griffith, and Watson 2019, 181). Large-scale studies by the CDC, and other public health agencies, have also found large disparities in team sport participation between LGB youth and their peers (Doull et al. 2018; Kann et al. 2018). For example, population-representative studies in Canada have found young gay males play team sports at half the rate (32.8% vs. 67.6%) of their peers (Doull et al., 2018). The growing evidence of harm to LGBT youth has led to calls by researchers, LGBT organisations, governments, and public health agencies for studies focused on identifying ways to stop the use of homophobic language in male sport (Greenspan, Griffith, and Watson 2019; Digital, Culture, Media, Culture, and Sport Committee 2017; Jeanes et al. 2019; Brackenridge et al. 2008). The research we share in this chapter helps to satisfy this need for evidence.

Response from Hockey

Studies have found many sport organisations ignore, or even refuse to engage in efforts to end discrimination experienced by LGBT people (Brackenridge et al. 2008; Shaw 2019), yet the same cannot be said for the NHL and other hockey leagues (Mortazavi 2017).

A review of actions by sport organisations on LGBT inclusion found the NHL is the only major professional sport organisation to "continually demonstrated the most positive attitudes towards gay athletes" (Heraux 2019, 77). Beyond hosting pride games, players from every NHL team have recorded multiple videos of support for the LGBT community, many have put 'rainbow tape' on their sticks to show their support or have become LGBT ambassadors in their community, and players and teams have marched in local pride parades around North America (Heraux 2019; Macdonald 2016).

The key driver of the NHL's activities has been advocacy by gay, amateur hockey players who felt excluded from mainstream hockey (Heraux 2019). These athletes co-founded an organisation called You Can Play, in partnership with and support from gay and straight sport executives, including Brian Burke, a powerful figure within the NHL, and his son Patrick (the NHL's Senior Director of Player Safety). These two leaders were motivated to help after the death of Brian's other son, Brendan, who was gay and, unlike Patrick, did not feel fully welcome in hockey when he was young. This kind of support from heterosexual, male, senior leaders in a sport

for the LGBT community is rare (Cunningham 2014), and also appears to explain why supporting the LGBT community has become an institutional norm within the hockey community.

How Do Pride Games Work?

The mechanism(s) through which the NHL and its LGBT community partner, You Can Play, believe pride games drive change has never been clearly articulated. Until recently, researchers have not been involved in the development, or evaluation, of this approach. This means significant resources have been put into the games, yet their purpose and how they are theorised to drive change remains undocumented in the literature.

To identify why pride games are held and the mechanism through which they may drive change, we reviewed dozens of press releases, videos, social media posts, and media articles about the games. This material suggest pride games are primarily designed to start conversations about the need for hockey to be welcoming to gay and bisexual males and to ‘change sport culture’ and ‘tackle homophobia’ through challenging ‘stereotypes’ that gay men, in particular, do not play hockey because they are uninterested or unable to play traditionally male sports (Hine 2016; Hingston 2016; National Hockey League 2017; 2019c). Another aim is shifting perceptions that a gay player would be detrimental to team success and cohesion (Mortino 2017; National Hockey League 2019a). This is illustrated by a press release from the NHL that says the games “drive culture change” in order to ensure those in the “locker rooms and spectator areas focus on athletic ability, work ethic, and team spirit, not sexual orientation” (National Hockey League 2019a). It is noteworthy, that in communication and promotional materials about pride games, there is rarely any mention of the specific behaviours that need to change (e.g., homophobic language) which can lead gay and bisexual men to fear discrimination and feel unwelcome. This odd omission will be discussed in detail throughout the rest of this chapter. The actual mechanism through which the games are theorised to drive change has never been clearly articulated, however, it appears they are designed to be mediums to provide education to address information gaps that support ‘homophobia.’ The games are also designed to expose people to the stories of gay and bisexual men, which align with the change mechanism described by parasocial contact theory (Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 2006). The games also appear to be designed to normalise non-heterosexual identities, which aligns with a dominant, albeit untested, theory within the sport management literature that suggests reducing ‘heterosexism’ could help to reduce sexuality-based stigma and discrimination in sport (Robertson et al. 2019). Cunningham (2019), a leading scholar in the field, suggests heterosexuality is placed in sport “as the norm or expected standard, and as a result, those who vary from the standard are necessarily cast as “other” and subsequently marginalized” (p. 317).

What Does Success Look Like?

For hockey's leaders, the metric of success for pride games seems to be whether openly gay and bisexual males come out while playing professional hockey, particularly in the NHL. This metric may be used because there has been no research by the NHL or other hockey leagues conducted to quantify other potential metrics, such as the use of homophobic language. The long-term focus on gay athletes is illustrated by an interview with Brian Burke in 2012 (online), a year before the first pride game, in which he said:

It's going to happen, it's going to happen....the (NHL) athlete that has the courage to come out is going to find the hill (to climb) is a lot less steep than he thinks it is, there's a lot of support, I know the players on our team have said to me a gay player is welcome here ("Brian Burke on the Prospect of an Openly Gay NHLer" 2012).

Similar comments have been made by the NHL's Commissioner Gary Bettman, for example, he was quoted in a Chicago Tribune article (online) titled:

"Gary Bettman says NHL is ready for its first openly gay player" as saying, "I think it's our job to create a culture and an environment where a gay player knows he is safe and welcome. If and when that happens, believe me, that person will have the full support of the commissioner's office" (Hine 2016).

The lack of openly gay or bisexual males in the NHL has led to questions among the sports senior leaders about the effectiveness of their approaches, illustrated by comments to the Associated Press by You Can Play co-founder, and NHL Senior Manager of Player Safety, Patrick Burke:

We felt that the work the league was doing, the culture that the league had, the way our guys responded not just to our initiative, but to the LGBT community in general, I think we thought for sure by now there would be an out player in the NHL (Associated Press 2016).

About the AIHL and Its Approach to Pride Games

The AIHL was formed in 2000 and has a structure similar to the NHL. The league has eight privately-owned teams (including two teams in Sydney, and two in Melbourne) and is described as a semi-professional league because most players, including overseas drafts, have non-sport jobs. Two AIHL teams, the Sydney Bears (a founder of the league), and the Melbourne Mustangs (more recent addition), began hosting pride games in 2017 after seeing them being held by teams in North America. The Bears and Mustangs report strong attendances, merchandise sales, and goodwill from

the community and their sponsors (Leighton-Dore 2018). Unlike the NHL, however, the pride games have not been adopted by all teams, which created the opportunity for us to study whether there are differences between the Bears and Mustangs and the other teams (comparison teams) in the number of openly gay or bisexual players, attitudes toward gay people, and the use of homophobic language.

The AIHL's approach to pride games is identical to that of the NHL, and other sport leagues such as MLB, albeit on a smaller scale. The similarity suggests the effects of the AIHL games should be similar to those held around the world. The approach used by the AIHL teams includes the recording and sharing of videos by players supporting the LGBT community using the hashtag #puckhomophobia and public relations activities (e.g. media releases) to generate coverage of the games to educate about 'homophobia' in sport, and showcase the stories of LGBT athletes affected by discrimination (Power 2017). At the games themselves, merchandise, including the rainbow jerseys worn by players, is sold and the rinks are decorated in rainbow (Leighton-Dore 2018; Power 2017). Speeches by LGBT community leaders at the start of the game are also heard by the players, spectators, and those watching at home. Members of the LGBT community, including amateur hockey players, are also invited to functions before and after the game, attended by players from the host teams.

The messaging used by the AIHL and NHL teams to describe the pride games is also nearly identical. They use positively framed, very broad language that makes little mention of the problems the games are trying to solve, or the behaviours that need to change, such as the regular use of homophobic language by players. The theme of almost all communication is that hockey is an 'inclusive sport and everyone is welcome.' We illustrate the similarities through two quotes from players talking about the games. The first is from a TV interview with Sydney Bears player Aston Brooks who said:

I think it's awesome that the Bears get behind the rainbow community and have games like this, it's nice to let everyone know that ice hockey, and sports in general, is for everyone no matter what gender they identify as or their sexual orientation, it's cool. Ice hockey is a game for everyone. (AIHL 2018).

The second quote comes from an NHL media release in which Toronto Maple Leafs player Zach Hyman is quoted as saying:

Hockey is a sport for everyone, regardless of gender identity, race, religion and sexual orientation. Our team and fans are all equal on the ice, stands, arenas and homes, and everyone should have the chance to play (National Hockey League 2019b).

MEASURING THE EFFECT OF PRIDE GAMES

All eight AIHL teams participated in the study, which involved players completing a 10-min survey prior to normal training/practice at the end of the 2018 season. Conducting research using paper and pen, prior to practice, results in a high participation rate, with just 6% of players refusing to participate, typically because they arrived late.

Randomisation of teams was unnecessary as all AIHL teams participated, and only two teams hold pride games. To address the lack of baseline data collected before the pride games began, the survey collected demographic data (age, ethnicity, sexuality) and included semantic differential scale items (1-6) to measure religiosity (e.g., not religious very religious), athletic identity, and conservative ideology. These character traits are associated with homophobic attitudes and behaviour (Herek 2007; O'Brien, Shovelton, and Latner 2013).

Collecting demographic and trait data allowed us to look for any differences between the pride game, and comparison teams that might explain differences in language use or other outcome variables. We measured intervention exposure by asking players if they were aware of the AIHL pride games, and also of You Can Play's work (Y/N). Players could become aware of the pride games either by playing in one (as a Mustang/Bear or on an opposing, visiting team), watching the games at home, or through social and conventional media promotion.

Homophobic language was measured using the Homophobic Content Agent Target (HCAT) approach (Poteat and Espelage 2005). This method does not ascribe homophobic intent to the use of language, and was chosen because studies have found male athletes who use homophobic slurs (e.g. faggot) do not perceive this language to be 'homophobic' because it is used to insult players they perceive to be heterosexual or for humour (MacDonald 2018; Magrath 2017).

To measure whether players perceived their teammates used homophobic language, the stem asked "Some people use words such as fag or poof. In the past two weeks how often have your teammates used words like these?" To measure whether players, themselves, used this language, the second stem asked, "How often have you used language like this with teammates?" Response options provided were never, 1-2 times, 3-4 times, 5-6 times, or 7+ times using a scale of 1-5 (higher scores indicate more language is used). Perceptions of the inclusivity of their team environment were measured by asking participants to indicate agreement with the statement "A homosexual player would feel very welcome on our team" on a six-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 6=Strongly Agree).

Homophobic attitudes were measured using the average score of the three-item version of the Attitudes toward Gay Men (ATG) scale (Herek 2007). The ATG scale is the most consistently used measure in sport and measures overt homophobia through participant agreement with items such as 'I think male homosexuals are disgusting.' We also measured attitudes by asking participants to indicate agreement to a single item statement "I would not be comfortable if my teammate was

homosexual.” This question was used in the study of Canadian teenage hockey players (MacDonald 2018). For both measures, a six-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 6=Strongly Agree) was used, with higher scores indicating more negative attitudes toward gay people.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Participants ranged in age from 16–47 (M 25.39, SD 5.22), and most (n = 107; 76.4%) reported Anglo-European descent, with the largest proportion (n = 75; 53.65) born in Australia, followed by Canada (n = 31; 22.1%) and the United Kingdom (n = 10; 7.1%). None of the participants identified as gay or bisexual. There were no significant differences in demographic composition of the pride game (Bears/Mustangs) and other teams (comparison teams).

As shown in Table 2, there were also no significant differences in character traits, or exposure to the pride game or You Can Play’s programs between the pride game and comparison teams. Overall, most participants reported a strong athletic identity (M 5.38, SD .99), few identified as highly religious, (M 1.89, SD 1.26), and there was a more normal distribution for the measure of conservative ideology, with most identifying as conservative (M 2.74, SD 1.23). Most participants (n = 107; 75.45) also reported they were aware of the AIHL pride games and a sizable proportion (n = 47; 33.6%) had heard about the work of You Can Play’s work.

Table 1: Means (SD) for demographic and trait measures

	<i>Pride Game</i>	<i>Comparison</i>
<i>Age</i>	26.3 (5.81)	25.0 (4.96)
<i>Athletic identity</i>	5.38 (1.0)	5.38 (.96)
<i>Religiosity</i>	2.05 (1.38)	1.83 (1.21)
<i>Conservative ideology</i>	4.08 (1.28)	4.33 (1.21)
<i>Awareness of AIHL pride games</i>	.74 (.45)	.76 (.43)
<i>Awareness of You Can Play’s work</i>	.37 (.49)	.32 (.47)

Note: trait scale 1(low) – 6 (high); awareness 0= No, 1= yes

The majority of players on all teams reported their teammates had used homophobic slurs at least once in the past two weeks, including more than half (n = 20; 54.1%) of players on the pride game and two-thirds (n = 70; 69.3%) of players on comparison teams. A Mann-Whitney U test for differences was used, due to non-normal distribution, which found players on pride game teams (mean rank = 57.41) were significantly less likely than players on the comparison teams (mean rank = 73.93) to report their teammates had used homophobic slurs, and they also reported this language is used less often by teammates (U = 1421, z = -2.2439, p=.025).

Players on the pride game teams were also significantly less likely (n=14; 37.8%; mean rank = 55.15) than on comparison teams (n = 62; 61.4%; mean rank = 74.76)

to self-report, they, themselves used homophobic language, and they also reported using slurs less often ($U = 1337.5$, $z = -2.716$, $p = .007$).

Table 2: Means (SD), and frequency for language, perception, and attitude measures

	Pride Game	Comparison
<i>Heard others use homophobic language</i>	1.95** (1.27) / 54.1%	2.50 (1.42) / 69.3%
<i>Used homophobic language</i>	1.59* (.96) / 37.8%	2.29 (1.42) / 61.4%
<i>Perceptions of inclusivity to a gay athlete</i>	4.66 (1.15)	4.61 (1.38)
<i>Homophobic attitudes (ATG)</i>	2.60 (1.21)	2.31 (1.04)
<i>Discomfort with having a gay teammate</i>	1.84 (1.18)	1.88 (1.40)

Note: language scale 1 (none) – 5 (7+times); all other scales 1 – 6; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

As shown in Table 1, no significant differences were found for measures of the perceptions of inclusivity, or attitudes. Overall, participants expressed positive attitudes toward gay people, though a sizeable proportion, agreed, at least somewhat, with the statement ‘male homosexuals are disgusting’ ($n = 25$; 17.5%) and one in five participants ($n = 21$; 19%) expressed some discomfort with having a gay teammate. Nearly all ($n = 131$; 91.6%) believed a gay teammate would feel ‘**very**’ welcome (emphasis from survey) on their team, with more than half ($n = 84$; 58.7%) strongly agreeing.

DISCUSSION

Our study of the AIHL teams provides the first published evidence that pride games may be an effective approach to mitigating the use of homophobic language in male team sport. It appears, however, that these games moderate the behaviour of players on teams that host the events, but not players on teams who play against host teams (visitors) or who are exposed to the games in other ways (e.g., watching at home). The majority of players on all teams were aware of the games, and a sizable proportion also reported being aware of the work of You Can Play.

More research would be needed to confirm our findings, but we suspect the differences we found may be due to the players on host teams being exposed to more intensive messaging and education about the need for the events. The players on host teams also have the opportunity for direct contact with members of the LGBT community at pre/post-game events, which is not available to visiting teams or those watching at home. There is strong evidence that direct contact with gay and bisexual people can reduce discriminatory behaviours and attitudes (Bartos, Berger, and Hegarty 2014), but no study has examined whether parasocial contact through pride games could have the same effect. Our study provides some evidence that this form of contact may not be enough, but further research would be needed to confirm this, which measures the level of parasocial contact that players receive (e.g., were they even paying attention during speeches by LGBT leaders?) and the effect.

Although our findings suggest pride games may help reduce homophobic language by hockey players, holding the games does not stop this behaviour, even among players on host teams. The rate and frequency that AIHL players use slurs such as ‘fag,’ which is on the extreme end of homophobic language (similar to the N word), should be of concern to those who administer the AIHL. This behaviour also likely explains why none of the players in our study identified as gay or bisexual.

The rate of language use, and lack of openly gay or bisexual players, does not seem to be a uniquely Australian problem, as our study replicated the findings of the study by MacDonald (2018) of Canadian teenage hockey players. Like the Canadian study, and recent research with teenage soccer players in the UK (Magrath 2017), we also found players who expressed positive attitudes about gay people, still used homophobic slurs. It is possible to conceive of a variety of explanations for this apparent disconnect between attitudes and behaviours among teenage athletes (i.e. lack of education, low maturity, inability to understand behavioural consequences), but it is hard to explain this behaviour by adult men, particularly those who have participated in pride games.

A cynical interpretation could be that the hockey players and the people who manage them, do not care about the impact of this behaviour or harm it could cause. It is also possible that this language is expressing actual antipathy toward gay people, and social desirability influenced responses to questions we used to measure attitudes toward gay people. However, this interpretation is challenged by the mean scores for homophobic attitudes being higher for the pride game teams (albeit the difference was not significant), yet their language use was lower. Social desirability also did not seem to influence responses to questions about language among the comparison teams; their self-reported rate of homophobic language use is nearly identical to that reported by other studies (Southall et al. 2011; Magrath 2017; Macdonald 2016; Denison et al. 2018).

During data collection, we also observed nothing to suggest homophobia is rife among players. Most hockey players appeared engaged when completing the survey, many thanked us for conducting the study, and it was common for them to make comments conveying genuine confusion around why they had never had an openly gay teammate. Based on these factors, we lean toward a more generous interpretation of the findings. We suggest the AIHL players, and those who manage them, are unaware this language is harmful or, they do not understand that, regardless of their intent (e.g., humour), if a gay person hears words like ‘fag,’ they would perceive this language to be an expression of prejudice (in the same way as an African American teammate would perceive the use of the N word). This interpretation is supported by the fact that the players have not received information about the harm caused by their behaviour in the messaging used about the pride games.

Further evidence that players are unaware of the negative impact of their behaviour comes from the relatively consistent perception that a gay teammate would “feel very welcome” on their teams. Their responses to this question seem disconnected from the reality of their team environments, but they also seem to be

near perfect echoes of the positive messaging players hear being used about the pride games (i.e., ‘hockey is a very supportive of the LGBT community,’ ‘hockey is for everyone’). The misperception among AIHL players that a gay player would feel welcome has likely been shaped by the positively framed, factually incorrect, messaging they hear being used when promoting the games and by the leaders of their sport.

Some commentators have suggested that this positive messaging is used to protect and enhance the reputation of hockey, rather than drive change. There may be some truth to this, however, this perspective is challenged by strong evidence of a genuine, long-term desire within the sport to create a culture where LGBT people feel welcome (Heraux 2019; Hine 2016). Hockey’s leaders, and NHL teams, have also invested significant resources to achieve their goal of increasing the number of openly gay players playing professionally. For this goal to be achieved, we suggest these leaders will need to start providing direct and clear information to those in the sport about how homophobic language is harmful and why it needs to stop.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Our study had limitations primarily relating to the lack of baseline data from before the AIHL teams started pride games. This means it is unclear if the players on the Mustangs and Bears have always used less homophobic language than the other teams. This seems unlikely given there were no significant differences in the compositions of the teams, as measured by demographic and character traits, as well as homophobic attitudes. It is possible that some other non-demographic, character trait, or attitude factor could explain the differences in language use, for example, perhaps both clubs have coaches who enforce anti-vilification policies, however, this also seems unlikely, given the language is still being used by the players, it has not stopped.

Despite the limitations, this study provides the first published evidence that pride games may be a useful approach to drive change to homophobic language, but the results will need to be confirmed, ideally with studies that measure the effect of pride games in teams which have never hosted the events, which will allow for pre/post data to be collected and compared.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In the absence of evidence that some other factor explains the lower rate of homophobic language use by Sydney Bears and Melbourne Mustangs players, compared to the other teams in the league, it is reasonable to conclude that these games have helped to mitigate this behaviour. These findings, therefore, support the use of pride games by the AIHL, NHL, and other leagues, such as the MLB, AFL, and MLS, as an intervention method to reduce homophobic language in sport. However, holding these games does not stop this behaviour, which suggests the approach being

used by the AIHL teams, which replicated the approaches used by NHL teams and teams in other sports around the world, may need to be refined.

The most important refinement needed is the discontinuation of the positively framed messaging used about pride games (e.g., our sport is welcoming and inclusive to LGBT people). Similar to other studies, we found little evidence of prejudice or antipathy toward gay or bisexual people, but we did find a near complete lack of awareness that using a word like ‘fag’ would be perceived by an LGBT person as an expression of homophobia.

Future communication about pride games, designed to address this problem, should be quite specific and direct to be effective. To illustrate, telling players to stop using ‘homophobic language’ would likely be ineffective as they do not perceive their behaviour to be homophobic. Instead, they will need to be told, ‘stop using words like fag, or making fun of gay people in your banter, because it is harmful to the mental health of LGBT teammates who don’t realise you are joking and that you are not actually homophobic.’

Further research will be needed to confirm, and understand, why it seems pride games change the behaviour of players on teams that host the events, but not the players on the other teams, including those who have been exposed to the games. It appears the benefits of the games may be limited and localised when only a few teams in a league hold these events, as is done in the AIHL. For the games to drive change in a sport, our findings support the approach taken by the NHL and other leagues, where all teams hold these events.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported by the Australian Government through the Research Training Program, and by unrestricted donations from You Can Play and the Sydney Convicts Rugby Union Football Club. Non-monetary support was also provided by the Melbourne Mustangs Ice Hockey team, the Australian Ice Hockey League, and Amnesty International. Prof. Kerry O'Brien, Dr. Nick Faulkner, and Associate Prof. Ruth Jeanes supported the study design and analyses. Paul Sanfilippo also supported the analyses. James Piggins, Matt Shillabeer, and Nadia Bevan supported data collection.

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