

SEXUAL IDENTITY STEREOTYPING: PERSPECTIVES OF HETEROSEXUAL FEMALE PRE-SERVICE PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has indicated that, due to mostly increasing involvement in sports and physical activities, female athletes and physical education (PE) teachers may risk being stereotyped as lesbians regardless of their actual sexual orientation. The purpose of this study was to examine the perception of sexual identity stereotyping (SIS) of heterosexual female PE pre-service teachers (PTs). The four specific questions the study explored were: (a) to what degree PTs understood the term SIS, (b) to what extent PTs encountered SIS, (c) how PTs reacted to and coped with any SIS that they might have encountered, and (d) how PTs perceived SIS would impact their future careers. Participants were five heterosexual female PTs in a physical education teacher education (PETE) programme of a university located in the south-eastern USA. Data were collected by formally interviewing each PT and analysed by employing an analytic induction and constant comparison approach. Results indicated that the PTs generally had a good understanding of SIS and that four of them had encountered it. Only one of the PTs, however, gave a personal experience of gender stereotyping. The personal experience of the five heterosexual female PTs may help pre-service and in-service PE teachers to see and understand the sociocultural tapestry of PE regarding SIS.

Keywords: Gender; Interviews; PE; Teacher training; Sociocultural.

Article citation: Chen, Y. & Curtner-Smith, M.D. (2014) Sexual identity stereotyping: perspectives of heterosexual female pre-service physical education teachers. *Graduate Journal of Sport, Exercise & Physical Education Research*, 2: 1-18.

INTRODUCTION

Identity refers to the distinctive characteristic belonging to a person or shared by a particular group of people, and is typically influenced by the aspects of home, school, workplace and community environment (Leary & Tangney, 2003). The construction of identity is thus relational and contextual and, thus, extensively influence by one's social environment. Gender identity, for instance, is a person's subjective sense of

being a male or a female. According to Wang (2008), gender-confident children develop same-gender attachments with their parents at home, experience same-gender attachments and explore opposite-gender curiosity and familiarities with their peers during school years, and ultimately build intimate, sexual relationships with their opposite-gender life partners. However, the formation can be difficult for those “who do not live their gender or sex as exclusively male or female; who have a fluid sense of their sex or gender; or who transition from one sex or gender to another” (Sykes, 2011, p. 35) because they do not conform to the traditional gender or sex roles. As a result, they find themselves romantically or sexually attracted to same-gender individuals. Despite almost unanimous agreement among medics, and behavioural and social scientists that homosexuality is a “normal” disposition, many individuals, institutions, and social, political and religious groups still believe it to be abnormal, dysfunctional and sinful (Rubin, 1993). The resulting homophobia was defined by Hemphill and Symons (2009) as “prejudice, discrimination, harassment or acts of violence that are based on fear, distrust, dislike or hatred of sexual minorities” (p. 398). The main goal of this action is to isolate, subordinate and discredit homosexuals (Ferfolja, 2007; Greendorfer & Rubinson, 1997).

Four main types of homophobia were identified by Gilbert (2000). *Institutional homophobia*, which emanates from various forms of government, business, religion and other social institutions, often leads to overt forms of discrimination (e.g., lack of employment opportunities and health care options). *Cultural homophobia* is more subtle and comes in the form of messages disseminated by the media in which heterosexuality is portrayed as normal and acceptable behaviour, and homosexuality is branded as deviant and dangerous. *Interpersonal homophobia* occurs when homophobes reveal their dislike and fear of homosexuals through humour, harassment and violence (Clarke, 1996, 2004; Mason & Tomsen, 1997; Sykes, 2011). Finally, *internalized homophobia* cultivates a personal ideology in which homosexuals are viewed as immoral and inferior to heterosexuals. This type of homophobia often leads to homosexuals accepting marginalization and avoiding “coming out.”

Homophobia has a long history in many social spheres, including sport (Anderson, 2011; Clarke, 1998) and related societal settings. As women have participated in more competitive and high-quality sports, homophobic reactions to them in some quarters have increased. Veri (1999) pointed out that female athletes are well trained and their body appears to be masculine, and thus speculated to be homosexual. Such transgression may oppress female athletes as the public stigmatizes them as social and sexual deviants. At its most extreme, homophobic comments suggested that heterosexual women should not participate in physical and competitive sporting forms (Griffin, 1992, 1993; Hall, 1996; Lenskyj, 1986) because doing so is a threat to patriarchy (Connell, 1987; Clarke, 1998; Whitson, 1994), not feminine (Clarke, 1998; Smith-Rosenberg & Rosenberg, 1987; Vertinsky, 1987), and displays of physical skill and power are designed to reveal the extent of a man’s masculinity (Clarke, 1998; Lenskyj, 1986; Wellard, 2006). Consequently, women who do not conform to traditional feminine traits and participate in sport (especially in specific sports like rugby and football) are assumed to be and often labelled as lesbians (Blinde & Taub,

1992; Clarke, 1998). Interestingly, as a result of this attitude, both lesbian and heterosexual female athletes have described their use of coping strategies including *concealment* (i.e., hiding their homosexuality), *deflection* (i.e., downplaying their athletic roles and accentuating their non-sporting roles) and *normalization* (i.e., attempting to redefine homosexuality for the public by emphasizing the positive characteristics and contributions of female athletes) (Blinde & Taub, 1992; Ussher, 1997).

Previous research indicates that female physical education (PE) teachers suffer in similar ways to female athletes because they are also working within the masculine domain of sport (Bredemeier et al., 1999; Clarke, 1996, 2006; Ferfolja, 2008; Sparkes, 1994; Squires & Sparkes, 1996; Sykes, 1998). The evidence is that both institutional (Gilbert, 2000) and interpersonal (Squires & Sparkes, 1996; Sykes, 1998) forms of homophobia are common in school settings, although the latter is unlikely to manifest itself in overt harassment or violence. Key concerns for lesbian (and, possibly, bisexual) PE teachers include protecting their lesbian identity from students, colleagues and parents; finding a sense of belonging in the heterosexual world; and securing their teaching positions (Sparkes, 1994; Squires & Sparkes, 1996). For these reasons, lesbian PE teachers, particularly those who are younger and inexperienced (Clarke, 1996; Sparkes, 1994; Squires & Sparkes, 1996), also engage in a number of coping strategies. These include concealing their sexual orientation by leading a “double life” through the careful fabrication of what appears to be normative heterosexual behaviour (Clarke, 1996; Lenskyj, 1997; Sparkes, 1994; Squires & Sparkes, 1996; Sykes, 1998; Woods & Harbeck, 1992). They also include silence, tolerance, denial and resignation (Clarke, 1996; Ferfolja, 2008; Sparkes, 1994; Squires & Sparkes, 1996). At the other end of the spectrum, some PE teachers chose to “come out” and are forthcoming about their sexual orientation in both personal and professional contexts. Denial of the true self and tolerance of homophobic behaviours are an unacceptable alternative.

The catalyst for the present study came from two sources. First, a significant amount of work has focused on exploring the perceptions of sexual identity stereotyping (SIS) and homophobic coping strategies from lesbian and heterosexual female athletes as well as lesbian PE teachers. This literature indicated that female PE teachers, in general, might face some of the same prejudices and marginalization encountered by lesbian PE teachers (Marcia, 1966; Worthington et al., 2008). Second, although the balance had improved in recent years, the undergraduate physical education teacher education (PETE) programme, where this study was conducted, was still mainly populated by male pre-service teachers (PTs). This could stipulate that some heterosexual female students, interested in a career in PE, might be dissuaded from doing so by the prospect of having their sexual orientation stereotyped, particularly in socially conservative states of the USA such as Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. As there is little attention paid to heterosexual female pre-service PE teachers' perceptions of SIS, such addition in the PETE literature would help faculty understanding of the heterosexual female PTs' position and provide guidance for future pre-service PE teachers about the realities in PE. Therefore, the purpose of

this exploratory study was to examine the influence of SIS on heterosexual female PTs. The four specific questions that the study attempted to explore were: (a) to what degree did PTs understand the concept of SIS, (b) to what extent had PTs encountered SIS, (c) how PTs reacted to and coped with any SIS that they had encountered and (d) how did PTs perceive SIS would impact their careers as PE teachers and athletic coaches?

METHOD

Participants

Eleven female PTs enrolled in a PETE programme at a large university in the south-eastern USA were invited to participate in the study via email. The email script stated that only female PTs who identified themselves as heterosexual individuals were eligible; however, it stressed that the authors would not conclude those who did not participate were homosexual or bisexual. Over a four-week recruiting period, five female PTs responded and signed a consent form in congruence with university policy on human subjects.

All five of the PTs, Sally¹, Ashley, Lauren, Jane and Elizabeth were Caucasian and born and raised in the “Deep South²”, where whiteness, masculinity and heterosexuality were the dominant culture (Newman, 2010). College football and NASCAR were particularly identified by Newman (2010) as the symbol in this region. As a result, female identity played an inferior role in sport and physical education as women were expected to assume a traditional gender role and display the characteristics traditional of femininity. Being in the field of sport and physical education, however, went against these deep-seated practices as the PTs participated in yoga, dance, cheerleading, weight training, running, swimming, biking, intramural softball and tennis on a regular basis.

Data Collection and Analysis

Each PT was formally interviewed by the first author in a private room at the library on campus. The interview script (see Appendix A) was drawn from the earlier work of Blinde and Taub (1992) with female athletes. It included questions aimed at gaining demographic data and an insight into PTs’ general understanding of SIS. With the existing literature and prior knowledge of the authors, research questions were developed to sensitize the concept of SIS from the PTs’ perspectives.

The protocol for the interviews was semi-structured (Patton, 1990) in that all PTs were asked the same lead questions, but multiple prompts and follow-up questions based on their initial answers were permitted. Interview duration was approximately 60 minutes. Each interview was audio-taped and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Examples of the codes were “softball”, “basketball”, “baggy sweatpants”, “longer khaki shorts” and “it doesn’t bother me at all.” These were organized into wider

categories such as SIS of female PE teachers, general stereotyping of female PE teachers as lesbians, and normalizing and defiance. Finally, emerging categories were merged or subdivided so as to form meaningful themes that answered the main questions driving the study. These themes included understanding SIS, encountering and reacting to SIS, and perceived impact of SIS on PTs' careers. Trustworthiness and credibility were established by member checking (i.e., asking the participants for clarification by paraphrasing or summarizing their thoughts), a thorough search for discrepant and negative cases (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984), and requesting feedback from all participants on the final manuscript. Participants indicated no changes to the original data set and analysis.

DISCUSSION

Understanding SIS

SIS of female athletes: Among the five PTs, four of them were clearly well aware that females who participated heavily in sport ran the risk of being stereotyped as lesbians regardless of their actual sexual orientation.

They [female athletes and PE teachers] play sports a lot throughout their lives and still stay in shape even after they stop playing competitively... Maybe it's their bigger bones and their bigger clothing... They fix their hair differently, they don't wear as much make-up... All that factors in [to them being stereotyped as lesbians]. (Elizabeth)

In congruence with previous observations and research (Blinde & Taub, 1992; Lenskyj, 1986; Smith-Rosenberg & Rosenberg, 1987; Vertinsky, 1987; Wellard, 2006), these PTs, however, qualified their responses by pointing out that those female athletes who participated in "manly" and "competitive" sports such as "softball", "basketball", "soccer" and "golf", and who were more "manly" in appearance (i.e., mesomorphic) were much more likely to be stereotyped in this way than those who participated in "girly" sports such as "cheerleading", "dance" and "gymnastics", and had "more feminine" physiques.

A lot of times, it depends on the sport... You know, people do think, "Well, if you are in a certain sports, then..." Softball is a big one, basketball can be sometimes. They think everyone is lesbian. Of course, I don't feel that way, but, you know, I have heard some other people believe that. I mean, when you think of softball, baseball, basketball, you think of men... I think the main thing is when you have those sports that used to be mainly man-sport, you get that kind of, well, stereotyping. (Lauren)

When I was in school, basketball and softball [players would be perceived as lesbians], mainly. Really demanding sports, not necessarily individual sports, but team sports, but sometimes maybe with golf. I know that came up some when I was in high school... In other sports, like with cheerleading and things

like that, you know, they might see you as being too girly, but I guess it depends on what sport it is. (Elizabeth)

In congruence with previous research (Anderson, 2011; Wellard, 2006), the PTs also noted that males who participated in “girly” or sports classified “feminine” were also likely to have their sexual identities stereotyped.

Guys look at the guys that do gymnastics as being “different,” and [think men who participate in] cheerleading can be [gay]... They think, “Oh, they are a little feminine.” Well, they are not. I mean, if you’ve see some of the stuff that guys have to do, you will be, like, “No, they are not.”... Automatically, gymnastics is thought of as a girl sport, so I think it depends on what the sport is... ‘cos people kind of... stereotype [sports] as a man and woman kind of thing. (Lauren)

A lot of guy cheerleaders are assumed to be gay, but in all reality, the majority of our team is extremely straight. I’ve been on the team for a couple of years where there is not a single gay [man]. Right now, we only have one gay boy but he is out about it. (Ashley)

SIS of female PE teachers: Ashley, Lauren, Jane and Elizabeth also saw a natural “connection” between female athletes and PE teachers. The connections made by the participants included regular involvement in athletics and physical appearance (Bredemeier et al., 1999; Clarke, 1996; Squires & Sparkes, 1996). From teaching, coaching, and participating in sports and physical activities, female PE teachers appeared to be fit, and thus muscular. Moreover, the nature of the subject matter required female PE teachers to wear athletic clothes and hair styles that were appropriate for participating in sports and physical activities (Bredemeier et al., 1999; Clarke, 1996; Squires & Sparkes, 1996). Those characteristics explained why female PE teachers were sexually stereotyped in similar ways to female athletes.

Being a PE teacher, a lot of the females are gonna be interested in sports; so they just have a connection: when they like sports, they have short hair, and they are female PE teachers . . . they must be lesbians, kind of thing. They wear longer shorts, longer khaki shorts, like guy shorts, never dress up, or [when] they dress up, they wear pants; they don’t wear like a dress or anything like that. (Jane)

[Female PE teachers] are more muscular, they take care of their bodies so they have more muscle on them, so they aren’t the skinny... body type. They have muscles. They don’t wear much make-up. They usually, since they are outside, just kind of have their mascara, just enough to make them presentable. Their hair is normally up rather than down and curly-fixed. They are in sweatpants a lot, and a lot of female teachers have nice pants and dresses whereas female PE teachers, wear like a sport bra and like a looser fitting shirt and sweatpants. (Ashley)

However, the PTs stressed that female teachers who taught sports that were generally categorized as feminine and who were “more feminine” in appearance were less likely to be sexually stereotyped as lesbian.

I definitely do think that people look at [female PE] teachers differently, depending on what their sports would be... I can definitely see where some people would look at someone that was maybe teaching softball or whatever. Maybe they are a little different than those who teach cheerleading; you know... “girlier” and they might get that [i.e., be sexually stereotyped as lesbian]. (Lauren)

Prevalence of SIS: In general, Lauren, Ashley, Jane and Elizabeth believed SIS of serious female athletes and PE teachers was fairly common, especially those participating in male-dominated sports such as basketball, soccer and baseball/softball. The participants also sensed that the extent of SIS varied by location. They felt that people living in perceived liberal places (e.g., San Francisco and New York) tended to be more acceptable for women to participate in sports and physical activities, so the degree of SIS would be smaller than those in invariably more conservative places.

There are certain places that certain sports are kind of bigger in. So I think when you're kind of going to that, it could maybe go to a point that it can [be more prevalent to label female athletes as lesbians]. Say, places where softball or basketball is the big sport that everybody plays. People might associate that more with men, you know, that kind of thing. So, when a woman steps in, [people might think], “Oh well [laughs], she must be different [laughs].” (Lauren)

I grew up in Kentucky. [In that state] people are more accepted for just who [they] are. They don't judge how they [female athletes and PE teachers] look like as much, as they are closer to the Bible Belt. So, when you see some of them [female PE teachers] that look different [in Kentucky], that's just the way they are. (Ashley)

In addition, when students were the source of SIS, the PTs noted that the degree to which they engaged in this kind of thinking was age related. They experienced that SIS-related conversations were carried out mainly, but not exclusively, among secondary school aged students.

As far as labelling female PE teachers as lesbians, I would say late middle school and high school [students are more likely to do so]. I think it does happen, but the younger kids, I don't really see anything... I think it's mainly in the upper grades, and I think a lot of that just has to do with the fact that it's just something to talk about among kids. I mean, the truth is a lot of it is just gossip. (Elizabeth)

More positively, the sentiment was that as it became more accepted by society that women participate in sports and physical activities, and sports and physical activities became less gendered, then the problem of female physical educators having their sexual identities stereotyped would eventually decrease and die out.

I think it's [SIS of female PE teachers] going away. I don't think it's as prevalent as it used to be. I think it used to be a lot more people judging the female PE teachers. But now it's more and more common [for women to participate in physical activity and sport], so people are trying to accept it more and realize that women do workout too, and do enjoy athletic competition... In the past, kind of like how culture itself progresses, it started out women did very low [amounts of] physical activity, like gymnastics. Now the women's [soccer] world cup is on national TV. I think the culture is progressing and realizing that women can do the same thing [as men]. (Ashley)

Impact of SIS on women considering a career in PE: PTs' beliefs about the significance of SIS regarding both heterosexual and lesbian women contemplating a career in PE depended on whether this stereotyping was perceived as threatening. Those who were not threatened, they suggested, would not be influenced by SIS at all.

I don't really think [SIS will] have much impact as long as [women considering a career in PE] love their job and love what they do. I don't think that would really make them decide that they don't want to be a PE teacher or anything like that. (Sally)

I think if [women considering a career in PE] are open-minded, [SIS] won't stop them from becoming a PE teacher. This is what I was telling you before; when the whole lesbian thing comes up, they can turn it into a teaching moment, teach the kids not to stereotype. (Jane)

Conversely, those who were threatened by SIS, the PTs suggested, may avoid a career in PE. Their thoughts heavily reflected on the stereotypical physical appearance of female PE teachers. They assumed that characteristics such as "short haircut", "longer khaki shorts", "never dress up" and "boyish figure" may keep those who were threatened by SIS away from becoming PE teachers (Bredemeier et al., 1999; Clarke, 1996; Squires & Sparkes, 1996).

[Female] PE teachers are not traditional female teachers; a lot of female teachers are teaching in the classroom and they wear dresses and heels. They look feminine, so people don't normally question them [about their sexual identity]. [Female] PE teachers, on the other hand, wear sweatpants and tennis shoes, kind of boyish. And, you know, people gossip. It doesn't bother me at all, but for those who are not comfortable with who they are, I guess [SIS of female PE teachers] can change their mind [about becoming a PE teacher]. (Ashley)

We had a really athletic PE teacher who had short hair and always in her Nike outfits, you know, and everybody thought of her as [a lesbian]. There is always that question tossing around, “Well, I wonder, you know, if she [is a lesbian]; which way does she go?”... There is gonna be that circling of gossip, no matter what, whether it’s the students or the parents or the teachers... That [kind of thinking] does put a lot pressure on [female PE] teachers, so I think it might be the reason [for those who were threatened by SIS to avoid a career in PE]. (Elizabeth)

Impact of SIS on women already embarked on a career in PE: The PTs were also keen to discuss the issues faced by heterosexual women who had already chosen to pursue a career in PE. Again, they suggested that those who were not threatened by SIS would be largely unaffected. Conversely, those who were threatened by SIS would have to respond to three types of homophobia emanating from five key sources. Specifically, the three types of homophobia were institutional, interpersonal and internalized homophobia (Gilbert, 2000), and the five sources of stereotyping were children and youths in PE classes, parents, other teachers, administrators and staff in schools. Also, there was no allusion to cultural homophobia (Gilbert, 2000) or other sources of stereotyping such as government, religion or the media.

Students, nowadays, in the democratic society we have in teaching... can go to the principal and, I mean, [PE teachers] could get fired. I mean, they are not supposed to get fired [due to] discrimination against sexual identity; but, you know, [administrators] can come up with different reasons to be, like, “Hey, you know, she didn’t turn this in on time” or something, “so we’re gonna write her up.” Like, the students or parents... could turn around and [say]... “My PE teacher is in the locker room and she is gay. I don’t want her in my locker room [because] she is gay.” The students could go to the principal and get her in trouble. (Jane)

I’m sure if they are [lesbian] but don’t want people to know, it will be hard [to have a career in PE]. I mean, school is a pretty social place where teachers eat lunch together and talk about everything, things like “Are you married?” or “Do you have a boyfriend?” They can’t lie forever. I mean, it’s gonna be hard... If they are straight, well, maybe they just have to deal with [institutional, interpersonal and/or internalized homophobia]. (Lauren)

Again, in congruence with previous research (Blinde & Taub, 1992; Bredemeier et al., 1999; Sparkes, 1994; Squires & Sparkes, 1996; Ussher, 1997), the PTs also believed female PE teachers who were particularly threatened by being labelled lesbian, regardless of whether or not they actually were, would adopt one or more of several coping strategies. These were normalization, coming out and deflection.

I feel like maybe [my junior high school PE teacher] was kind of overloaded with comments and calls [about being gay], and I think there were some issues with parents complaining and some of the kids were getting pulled out of the sport. I think she just felt like, “Well, maybe if I take a step back it may

not be the kids' fault, it's the parents that pulled them out, so if I step back, then, they can still play the sport and succeed." I think she just didn't want to step on any more toes... I think that was her way out of the gossip and everything, just lay everything out there, and being like, "Okay, yes, I am [lesbian], but I'm still your PE teacher and, you know, you need to respect me either way." (Elizabeth)

Being in PE, a lot of us would wonder, "Hey, is our PE teacher gay?" Just because... she was a female... We never asked the teacher, we just talked about it. [But,] like in a month or so, she found out [that students were curious about her sexuality], so she started mentioning her husband and kids during softball practice. (Jane)

As well as acknowledging coping strategies identified by previous research, the PTs also described another coping strategy that they had observed teachers adopting. This was building closer relationships with students while at the same time establishing clear boundaries for them. Participants believed that students were more likely to follow teachers' directions and take their advice when they realized that their teachers cared for them. As Elizabeth explained: "You can have a teacher who is a lesbian but the sweetest, the best teacher that you've ever had, whereas this guy might be pervert, you don't know."

I knew my PE teachers well... Even with that [i.e., close relationship], honestly, I can barely remember her coming down to the locker room and it could've been that reason [i.e., issue of SIS]. She'd come in and say, "Hey, everybody, get ready. Everybody needs to get out." She kind of gave us a warning. She might do a walk-through, just to make sure everybody [was] going and getting ready or whatever, but she didn't come down there and hang out while everybody was getting ready and all that, you know. (Lauren)

Finally, rather than adopting any type of coping strategy, the PTs suggested that perhaps the best action that could be taken by teachers when confronted with SIS was to ignore it completely.

I know in my high school, a lot of the female PE teachers were just looking at their achievement in whatever sports [they were coaching]. They didn't necessarily do anything with [the issue of SIS]. They still wore that [i.e., non-feminine dress] to school... every day. (Ashley)

Well, I just don't assume female PE teachers are lesbians. My PE teachers came to school in their running shorts and T-shirt and tennis shoes; it didn't matter to me what they wore or what they looked like. I think they just didn't worry about it [i.e., SIS]. And I think, because they didn't do anything different [in response to the issue of SIS], the kids just stopped talking about it. (Sally)

Encountering and Reacting to SIS

General stereotyping of female PE teachers as lesbians: Prior to enrolling in the PETE programme all of the PTs except Sally had encountered situations in which female PE teachers were stereotyped as lesbians. Typical of their comments on this issue were the following:

I know parents probably talk [about female PE teachers being lesbians] and... even some other [classroom] teachers talk about it too"... We had two female [PE teachers]. One [female PE teacher] was stockier. She'd played softball her whole life. She had short hair. She didn't really fix it up or anything. And then we had another [female] PE coach that, you know, had long hair, didn't wear loose-fitting clothes. They looked more like workout clothes. And I think the kids were just kind of put off by the [stockier] teacher because she didn't look like the other one [i.e., the feminine teacher]. (Elizabeth)

In addition, these PTs relayed that they had themselves stereotyped some female PE teachers as lesbians. Specifically, while attending middle school, they reported "wondering if my female PE teachers were lesbian" (Jane) and recalled they and their female classmates discussing the sexual identities of those teachers who were "butch", "coached softball" or were heavily "into athletics."

In high school, there was one teacher. She coached softball and when she first came, for the first two or three weeks, the guys were kind of, you know, "She looked... I wondered if she was gay." But then, after the first month, everybody kind of figured it out, you know. She was married and she was just a really good softball coach and won [the] State [Championship] that year. So they just kind of forgot about it. (Ashley)

While the PTs obviously thought little about the labelling of female PE teachers' sexuality, in general, prior to enrolling in PETE, as illustrated by the following data snippets, after enrolling in the programme they thought even less about the issue. It is more important for the PTs to learn how to teach quality PE than to "waste [their] energy on that sort of thing" (Ashley).

I don't question that [i.e., SIS], not now. In middle school, yes... Just like [other] kids, we were just wondering [if our female PE teachers were gay]. But now, it just doesn't cross my mind... We have so much to do; lesson plans, PETAI analysis, and study for midterms and finals. I want to be done [in school] and get a job right away, so I just don't think about that kind of stuff anymore. (Jane)

Now? Not necessarily. There are two women that I worked around and they were highly respected. I wonder why the kids never said anything bad about them. As far as I could see, the kids really looked up to them. I really want to be like her in the future. So, I don't really have whole lot of thoughts [on the issue of SIS] any more. (Elizabeth)

Stereotyping of the PTs as lesbians: Prior to and following their enrolment in the PETE programme, Elizabeth Lauren and Ashley relayed that they had not been stereotyped as lesbians, and believed this to be because their main sports were “dance and gymnastics and that kind of thing so we don’t get [labelled like] that” (Lauren). Only Jane recalled having her sexual identity stereotyped as lesbian. This, she perceived, was not because of her career choice but because of her love for and heavy participation in the sport of softball.

I have played softball my whole life, so I’ve been asked out front, “Hey, are you gay?” I remember, my freshman year in high school, the team captain, a senior, [when] we were in the locker room, [said], “Hey, we just think this person, this person and this person is gay, are you?” They just called you out, just asked you, so it’s just that kind of thing. And the other thing was if you became a really good friend with somebody [on the team], there was [the question], “I wonder if they are together?” [They] just automatically thought that. And also... from playing softball, I have a lot of good friends that are gay, so I’ve always been asked, “Are you gay”, and I’m, like, “No, I just have friends that are gay.” (Jane)

Jane also explained that her reaction to having her sexual identity stereotyped as lesbian had changed as she had got more used to it. Initially, her reaction was one of fury. More recently, she had found it humorous.

I know the first time I got asked, I got mad. I was like, “Why would you think that?... Do I look gay?” I mean, “Hello, I... no, I do not. Why would you ask that?” And now, my best friend, she is gay, so we hang out, like, all the time, so now when people ask... we’ll make jokes. Like, people ask if we are together, I’m like, “Oh yeah, we’ve been together like five years.” They were like, “Really?” I was, like, “No, just kidding [laughs].” (Jane)

Perceived Impact of SIS on PTs’ Careers

Lack of threat: None of the five PTs in the study felt personally threatened by SIS and did not appear to have given the topic much thought prior to the study. Indeed, they were adamant that, even if they were stereotyped, they would not employ any of the personal coping strategies to which they thought other women in their profession might turn. For example, they noted that they would not conceal or deflect (Blinde & Taub, 1992; Bredemeier et al., 1999; Sparkes, 1994; Squires & Sparkes, 1996).

I don’t think [SIS] would [influence my future plan], honestly. It really doesn’t affect [my decision to be a PE teacher]. I don’t think it would affect me in the long run just because if you know who you are, you just have to pull straight up to your students as hard as you can. (Elizabeth)

I'm very comfortable with who I am... I think there is a time and place I need to look really nice. But if I'm planning on running around, getting dirty or doing sports, I don't think I need to be all pretty... I know [that there might be] the rumour spread among the kids but I'm planning to have a wedding ring on my finger someday... I don't think I'd change what I wear or how I present myself just because people are "wondering" if I'm [a lesbian] or not. (Ashley)

Normalizing and defiance: The one partial and positive exception to the non-use of coping strategies came from Jane who suggested that, although she was heterosexual, she would attempt to "normalize" (Blinde & Taub, 1992; Ussher, 1997) homosexuality by openly discussing SIS with her pupils. In addition, the PTs were somewhat defiant about the prospect of having their sexual identities stereotyped.

I could just do the opposite aspect. It makes me wanna teach them more, to teach kids not to stereotype, like, even I have gay best friends. No sense to stereotyping other people. I'll turn it into a teaching moment. I don't think it'll influence me at all. Just because, like I told you, I have a lot of friends that are gay and play softball. This is what I want to teach the kids. So if they have any questions or the whole lesbian thing comes up as me being a PE teacher, I'll turn around, making it into a teaching moment, to teach them not to stereotype. (Jane)

If they want to stereotype me, go ahead. They'll eventually figure it out on their own [i.e., that she is not a lesbian]. It's one of those things where I just don't bother myself with things like that... I'd rather have a lesbian, [who is] a really great teacher teaching my kid... The way you treat other people and the way you act means more to me. (Lauren)

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the project was to explore heterosexual pre-service PE teachers' perception of sexual identity stereotyping (SIS). Five one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with heterosexual female PTs were conducted to discover (a) the degree to which they understood the term SIS, (b) the extent to which they had encountered SIS, (c) how they had reacted to and coped with any SIS that they had encountered, and (d) how they perceived SIS would impact their careers as PE teachers and athletic coaches. To explore the first research question, the PTs were aware that women participating in sports, especially those associated with male-dominated ones, risked having their sexual orientation stereotyped regardless of their actual sexual orientation. They also made the connection with female PE teachers based on their regular involvement in athletics and physical appearance. Secondly, among the five PTs, only Jane had personally encountered SIS as her primary sport was softball. The other four had only "heard of" or "gossiped about" their PE teachers in middle or high school. In response to the third question, "wondering" at the early age and gradually fading out the conversation appeared to come across all PTs, including Jane, who was furious the first time someone asked her if she was a lesbian but

could later joke about the encounter as she became older. Finally, none of the PTs perceived the issue of SIS would have any impact on their career plan as they prioritized teaching quality PE over anything else. The stories of the five heterosexual female PTs indicated that, although being a PE teacher runs a risk of being stereotyped as lesbian, pursuing a career in and committing to the field of PE were still their top job choice. The PTs' beliefs and values with regard to sexual identity in PE may help other female PTs prepare themselves before entering the field of PE and current PE teachers explain gender and/or sexuality issues to colleagues, parents and students.

Five perspectives were concluded on the issue of SIS based on the interview data. First, PTs were aware that heterosexual female PE teachers can be sexually stereotyped as lesbian. Second, the degree to which heterosexual female teachers' sexual identities are stereotyped is strongly related to the sports and physical activities in which they participate, and their physical appearance. That is, female PE teachers with a more mesomorphic physique participating in "masculine" sports and physical activities are more likely to be stereotyped as lesbians. On the other hand, female PE teachers with more "feminine" physiques who participate in "feminine" sports and physical activities are less likely to be stereotyped as lesbians. Third, sexual stereotyping of heterosexual female PE PTs and teachers appears common but is dependent on socio-geographic location. In other words, the content of the dominant discourse regarding normative gender role and behaviour in which women practice sport and physical activity influences the degree to which female PE teachers may be stereotyped as lesbians. Fourth, heterosexual women contemplating a career in PE and threatened by SIS appear to be influenced by whether or not they choose to enter PETE. Potential PTs who are likely to be stereotyped as lesbians may be threatened and likely to avoid a career in PE. However, potential PTs who are less likely to be stereotyped as lesbians are less threatened and likely to pursue a career in PE. Finally, after securing employment as a PE teacher, heterosexual female PTs' experience of SIS depends on the degree to which they are threatened by it. Neophyte PE teachers not threatened by SIS are largely unaffected but may attempt to "normalize" (Blinde & Taub, 1992) homosexuality or fight back against stereotyping. Neophyte PE teachers threatened by SIS, on the other hand, employ one or more of several coping strategies to deal with various manifestations of homophobic attitudes at such institutional, interpersonal and internalized levels (Gilbert, 2000).

Limitations and Future Research

The present study has a few limitations. First, the sample size was too small; all participants were from the same PETE programme at a university. The beliefs and values of the five PTs did not represent the population of heterosexual female PTs in general. Future research in regard to the gendered and/or sexualized experiences of female PTs and PE teachers could be performed using quantitative research methods, which allows a larger sample size and, consequently, produces more convincing results. Besides, it was impossible for the authors to completely suppress their subjectivities and sensibilities on the interpretation of the data and the

presentation of the narratives. Thus, some thoughts given to reflection and auto-critique were warranted. Last, the present study was conducted with PTs who had only taught during early field experience. PE teachers' experiences of interacting with school-aged students on a daily basis regarding the issues of SIS were limited in the study. Future research could provide a more extensive exploration of stories of heterosexual female in-service PE teachers that could provide greater insight into gender-specific sexuality stereotyping experiences in PE and other sport and exercise-specific domains.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to gratefully thank Dr Matt Curtner-Smith for his guidance, understanding and patience. I would like to thank Dr Brent Hardin, Dr Cecil Robinson, Dr Oleg Sinelnikov and Dr Margaret Stran, for their input, valuable discussions and accessibility throughout the process. I would also like to thank all of my participants for volunteering their time and sharing their personal experiences with me.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Script

1. Demographic information (multiple prompts allowed)

- How old are you?
- Where were you born?
- What is your race?
- What is your ethnic origin?

2. General understanding of sexual identity stereotyping (multiple prompts allowed)

- What do you understand by the term “sexual identity stereotyping” in relation to female participation in sport?
- What do you understand by the term “sexual identity stereotyping” in relation to women taking on the role of physical education teacher?
- Are there any differences between the sexual identity stereotyping of women in sports and physical education? If yes, please describe.
- Why do you think female physical education teachers are labelled as lesbians?
- How prevalent is the labelling of female physical education teachers as lesbians?
- What are the characteristics of female physical teachers who are more likely to be labelled as lesbians?
- What impact do you think the threat of having one’s sexual identity stereotyped (i.e., being labelled a lesbian) has on women considering a career as a physical education teacher?

3. Encountering sexual identity stereotyping (multiple prompts allowed)

- Prior to enrolling in the PETE programme did you encounter any general stereotyping of female physical education teachers as lesbians? If yes, please describe.
- During your time in the PETE programme, have you encountered any general stereotyping of female physical education teachers as lesbians? If yes, please describe.

- Prior to enrolling in the PETE programme, did you encounter any sexual identity stereotyping, in terms of being labelled as a lesbian, yourself? If yes, please describe.
- During your time in the PETE programme, have you encountered any sexual identity stereotyping, in terms of being labelled as a lesbian, yourself? If yes, please describe.

4. Reactions to and coping with sexual identity stereotyping (multiple prompts allowed)

- How did you react to and cope with any general stereotyping of female physical education teachers as lesbians prior to enrolling in the PETE programme?
- How have you reacted to and coped with any general stereotyping of female physical education teachers as lesbians during your time in the PETE programme?
- How did you react to and cope with having your sexual identity stereotyped, in terms of being labelled a lesbian, prior to enrolling in the PETE programme?
- How have you reacted and coped with having your sexual identity stereotyped, in terms of being labelled a lesbian, during your time in the PETE programme?
- Has the stereotyping of female physical education teachers as lesbian had any influence on your teaching in the schools?

5. Perceptions of how sexual identity stereotyping will impact future career (multiple prompts allowed)

- To what extent has the stereotyping of female physical education teachers as lesbians influenced your future career plan?
- In what ways, if any, do you think the stereotyping of female physical education teachers as lesbians will influence your teaching and behaviour in schools once you gain employment?

6. Other (multiple prompts allowed)

- Is there anything else you want to tell me about the stereotyping of female physical education teachers' sexual identity?

Footnotes

¹The names of the PTs in this paper are fictitious.

²Deep South is a descriptive category of the geographic sub-regions in the United States of America. The term is commonly used to describe the social conservatism based on the region's high religiosity, including demands for home-schooling, prayer in public schools and opposition to homosexuality.