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A Phenomenological Study: Coping Skills of Gay Men in Amateur Sports

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Jesuel Alamo

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Walden University
2017

Abstract

A Phenomenological Study: Coping Skills of Gay Men in Amateur Sports

by

Jesuel Alamo

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

The world of sports has traditionally been known for promoting masculine behaviors, including a resistance to homosexuality. Research supports that gay men in sports have historically encountered prejudice and discrimination. Although the social climate has experienced change regarding homophobic discrimination and prejudice, research shows that challenges still exist for gay men who participate in sports; furthermore, to date, research could not be located that addresses the coping skills of gay men in amateur sports. This research addressed the lack of qualitative studies on the experiences of gay men who participate in amateur sports and on their use of coping skills. The purpose of the study was to describe the lived experiences of 8 gay men in amateur sports and to identify the coping skills, whether adaptive or maladaptive, used in sports environments. This study examined current literature on the consequences of prejudice and discrimination against gay men in sports environments. The conceptual framework for this study was based on the minority stress theory. The methodology was a phenomenological inquiry to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of this population. The 3 themes that emerged from the data were situation modification coping, emotion-focused coping, and minority stress. Understanding the experiences of gay men in amateur sports contributes to positive social change by identifying adaptive coping strategies, resulting in positive outcomes such as decreased stress and anxiety. Moreover, the lived experiences provided by this study's participants can provide direction for additional research to improve the experiences of gay men in sports.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

In recent years, several professional male athletes have openly come out as gay, including National Football League (NFL) defensive lineman Michael Sam, National Basketball Association (NBA) center Jason Collins, and boxer Orlando Cruz (Hagler, 2012; Luisi, Luisi, & Geana, 2016). As more gay athletes openly disclose their sexuality, it becomes increasingly more valuable to document current experiences and stories so that other gay men, in both professional and amateur sports, can learn to cope with the prejudice and discrimination often encountered in sporting environments (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). Research data supports that gay men in sports have long encountered various challenges, including prejudice and discrimination due to homonegative and heterosexist dialogue (Cunningham, & Melton, 2012; Pummer, 2006; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). On the other hand, Anderson (2011) suggested that gay men today no longer face the same type of homophobia in competitive sports as a few decades ago. Despite the current shift in public attitudes toward gay rights, however, homophobia in competitive sports is still widespread (Billings, Moscovitz, Rae, & Brown-Devlin, 2015). The experiences of gay men in amateur sports and their use of coping skills have not been documented in the literature. Therefore, this research endeavored to provide greater insight into the experiences of these men. The implications for positive social change include a better understanding of the experiences of gay men in amateur sports and the potential to identify positive coping strategies.

The theoretical and conceptual frameworks, which guided the understanding of these experiences, are discussed in Chapter 2.

Background of the Problem

During this time of increased awareness of human rights, hundreds of American activist organizations are fighting for laws and policies to protect the rights of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities (HRC Story, 2017; LGBT Rights, 2017). The last several decades have been a time of greater acceptance for homosexuality and gender expression (HRC Story, 2017; LGBT Rights, 2017). Although considerable research was conducted prior to the 1980s regarding the relationship between homosexuality, sports, and masculine behaviors, gay athletes continued to hide their sexual identities and rarely publically disclosed their sexuality (Anderson, 2011; Garner & Smith, 1977; Sabo & Runfola, 1980). For example, Pronger (1990) conducted a study on gay athletes in Canada and could not locate openly gay athletes in professional sports. In the Western world, there were very few openly gay athletes, whether in individual or team sports such as running, football, rugby, or swimming (Anderson, 2011). Woog (1998) reported that gay athletes did not openly disclose their sexuality due to anticipating hostile treatment because of the high degree of homophobic behavior common among athletes.

During the 1990s, Griffin (1998) reported that gay athletes had encountered hostile and intimidating circumstances after their sexuality was disclosed. However, there is increasing evidence that indicates attitudes may be changing across sports cultures and within society in general (Cashmore & Cleland, 2012). Even so, studies

suggest that gay athletes choose to keep their sexual identity hidden throughout their careers (Campbell et al., 2011). In 2002, when former NFL player Tuaolo openly declared that he was gay, a former teammate stated that if Tuaolo had disclosed his sexuality while he was still playing, he would have been hated by all his teammates (Campbell et al., 2011). Hardaway, NBA player, publicly stated that he hates gay people and he would never want a gay player to be on his own team (Campbell et al., 2011). Consequently, many gay men in sports may have hidden their sexual identities from the public eye and from their teammates.

Current research on sexual identity in the sports world has demonstrated a complex and changing perspective regarding the experiences of gay men at both the professional and amateur levels (Cavalier, 2011). Place and Beggs (2011) described how gay-specific sports leagues and clubs provide a nonthreatening environment for gay men. Nevertheless, the authors claimed that gay men still encounter threats in traditional amateur sports clubs, which motivate them to seek sports activities with other gay men. Sports participation has also been associated with feelings of masculinity, which may add to the pressure that gay men experience when trying to accommodate certain masculine expectations, such as aggression, toughness, and endurance (Gough, 2007).

Although several prominent athletes have openly disclosed their sexuality, controversy abounds regarding homosexuality in sports. In 2008, for example, National Broadcast Corporation (NBC) reporters were criticized for failing to acknowledge Olympic gold-medalist Mitcham's sexual orientation and for not showing his family or same-sex partner who were observers at the games (Billings et al., 2015). During the

2013 NFL Scouting Combine, scouts sought to confirm the sexual orientation of Kasa, tight end for the University of Colorado, by asking: “Do you like girls?” (Billings et al., 2015). Likewise, gay athletes in amateur sports have also encountered various challenges. For example, Anderson (2011) described numerous interviews he conducted with high school and college athletes. The research findings suggested that homophobia often influenced these athletes to engage in heterosexual dialogue with their heterosexual teammates so as not to appear homosexual, in addition to influencing their choice in the type of sport to play (Anderson, 2011). Moreover, Muir and Seitz (2004) conducted an observational study of collegiate rugby athletes over the span of several years in which findings demonstrated an inherent homophobic culture through the use of denigrating jargon and behavior.

These examples underscore how sports environments, professional and amateur alike, continue to foster homophobia and present challenges for gay men who participate in sports in terms of disclosing their sexuality (Billings et al., 2015). To that end, the world of sport has mandated gender-appropriate behaviors so that male dominance and power are preserved, thereby promoting prejudice and discrimination (Cunningham & Melton, 2012; Cunningham & Sagas, 2008). According to Cramer, Miller, Amacker, and Burks (2013), discrimination often causes individuals to internalize these societal reactions, resulting in self-stigmatization. Herek, Gillis, and Cogan (2009) found that self-stigmatization leads to lower self-esteem and lower psychological well-being. Additionally, Cramer, McNiel, Holley, Shunway, and Boccellarri (2012) suggested that LGBT victims of homophobic acts are at increased risk for psychiatric conditions.

The experiences of gay men in amateur sports and their use of coping skills have not been documented in the literature. This research provided a better understanding of their experiences and additional insight into needs they may have. A theoretical model that provided a better understanding of their experiences is the minority stress theory. The minority stress theory suggests that sexual minorities are subjected to excessive stress as a result of social discrimination. This model is detailed later in this chapter and in Chapter 2.

Problem Statement

The problem this research addressed was the lack of qualitative studies on the experiences of gay men who participate in amateur sports and on their use of coping skills. The existing body of literature describes the negative impact of antihomosexual prejudice and discrimination, which contributes to psychological and emotional stress (Cramer et al., 2013; Gough, 2007; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). In addition, existing literature describes the overall experiences of gay athletes and the type of discrimination encountered; however, to date, research could not be located that addresses qualitative studies on the experience of gay men who participate in amateur sports in relation to their coping skills, whether adaptive or maladaptive.

Research Question

The following research question was used in this phenomenological study:

How do gay men in amateur sports utilize coping skills?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to describe the experience of gay men in amateur sports and their use of coping skills. This study sought to broaden the understanding of the coping skills of gay men in amateur sports. The literature provided an understanding of the discrimination and prejudice often encountered by gay men in sports culture; in addition, the experience of gay men in amateur sports was investigated through a phenomenological approach. The method for investigation and specific interview questions is provided in Chapter 3 and Appendix B.

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework was appropriate for this phenomenological study because the framework was structured from broad ideas to help properly identify the issue under study, and frame and provide clarity to the research question. This study was framed according to the minority stress theory, which suggests that sexual minorities are subjected to excessive stress as a result of social stigmatization, internalized homophobia, and experience of prejudice (Meyer, 2013). Meyer (2013) developed the theory based on stress literature, psychological theory, and mental health research within the lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) population. In the world of sports, heterosexism and hegemonic masculinity are reinforced, thereby affecting expected behaviors (Cunningham & Sagas, 2008). The question becomes whether minority stress influences the coping skills required to manage oppressive environments. Therefore, this study put together the phenomenon as experienced by the participants in order to develop a worldview based on

detailed descriptions of their stories and experiences. A more thorough explanation of this conceptual framework is addressed in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

The phenomenological method of inquiry focuses on what the participant experiences, and seeks to describe and clarify the meanings of these experiences (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). Thus, phenomenological research was selected so that the experiences of gay men who participate in amateur sports can be further explored, and to identify the coping skills used in this environment. Phenomenology assisted me to understand the social and cultural aspects that influenced the individual's participation in a heteronormative sports culture.

The conceptual framework for this study was gay men in amateur sport and their use of coping skills. The study confined itself to researching participants who experienced this same phenomenon, and described the common understanding of the participants with their own lived experience of the research phenomenon. By means of personal references and snowball sampling, potential participants were obtained and contacted via telephone or email. Each participant was sent an informative letter describing the nature of the study, and was provided an informed consent and statement of confidentiality document. Semistructured interviews were conducted with individual participants in which qualitative questions were asked to understand the participants' experiences.

Phenomenology seeks to examine the *how* and *what* of the experience (Creswell, 2013). I explored the deeper meanings of the participants by developing individual and

group descriptions, describing *what* the participants experienced by providing verbatim examples of these multiple experiences, and structural descriptions, describing *how* the experience occurred. A more thorough description of data analysis is reviewed in Chapter 3.

Operational Definitions

Amateur sports: Sports in which athletes are not financially compensated for their training or performance, and do not practice or play with professional teams (Amateurism, n.d.).

Coping: An individual's behavioral and cognitive efforts to manage specific internal and/or external demands that are viewed as challenging the individual's capabilities (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986).

Hegemonic masculinity: Connell's (1995) social theory of gender claims that the hierarchical relation between genders is perpetuated by hierarchies within genders. The dominance of masculinity over femininity is shown by some levels of masculinities over other forms resembling femininity (Lusher & Robins, 2010).

Heterosexism: The cultural ideology that perpetuates sexual stigma by denying and denigrating any nonheterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community (Bandermann & Szymanski, 2014).

Homonegative: The negative cognitions and behaviors directed toward individuals who are considered to be gay or lesbian (Morrison & Morrison, 2011).

Professional sports: Sports in which athletes are paid for their performance. These are typically involved with commercial consumer product marketing in which professional marketers build brand awareness (Robinson & France, 2011).

Assumptions, Limitations, Scope, and Delimitations

This phenomenological study sought to understand the essence of gay men who play sports. The lived experiences of the participants guided the analysis, findings, and conclusions of the study. Nevertheless, some assumptions and limitations must also be addressed.

- Participants of this study consisted of gay men who participate in amateur sports.
- The assumption of this study was that participants would answer all of the interview questions openly and honestly.
- The results of this study are limited to gay men in amateur sports. Other sexual orientations are not within the scope of this study, which limited the scope of the study to only gay men.

Phenomenological inquiry may not provide the quantitative descriptions previous studies concerning gay athletes have found. Quantitative studies are able to specifically identify public attitudes toward gay athletes (Campbell et al., 2011). The findings from this study are limited to interpretation rather than quantitative analysis.

Significance of the Study

Existing literature demonstrates how sexual minorities experience greater risk of physical, social, spiritual, and mental illnesses due to mandated and hostile heterosexist environments (Mink, Lindley, & Weinstein, 2014). However, as more gay men in sports

openly disclose their sexuality, a clear need for additional research is warranted to identify the coping skills required by gay men who actively participate in amateur sports. Mink et al. (2014) described how coping involves both cognitive and/or behavioral actions to manage negative stressors. For sexual minorities, adaptive coping may include a social support system and strategies that seek to promote positive psychological adjustment. On the other hand, maladaptive coping may include self-hatred, increased stress, and negative health outcomes (Mink et al., 2014). Although adaptive and maladaptive coping are defined, the literature lacks qualitative analyses that provide insight into the stories of gay men in amateur sports and their use of coping skills. As a result, the implications for positive social change include a better understanding of the experiences of gay men in amateur sports and the potential to identify positive coping strategies. This increased understanding provides knowledge as to how stigma and prejudice negatively influence gay men who play sports. Hence, the implications for positive social change include increased visibility of the emotional and psychological challenges reported by gay men.

Moreover, this information provides support to other gay men who experience depression and anxiety disorders as a result of immersion in a culture that may not openly welcome them (Gough, 2007; Mink et al., 2014). The shared stories and experiences of how gay men in amateur sports utilize coping skills can lay the foundation for additional research that seeks to explore tailored therapeutic treatments. Other gay men in sports, both professional and amateur, can learn how their peers have coped with conflict. Also, this information is useful for gay men outside of the sports arena to similarly find the

courage to move forward with life – simply because other men have continued undaunted despite oppression and discrimination. Hence, a phenomenological study was conducted to provide greater understanding and insight into the shared and lived experiences of gay men in amateur sports.

Summary of Chapter 1

The world of sport has long been characterized by highly masculine behaviors, and has demonstrated a strong resistance to homosexuality and the inclusion of openly gay athletes (Cunningham, & Melton, 2012; Pummer, 2006; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). Research has shown that gay men have often encountered discrimination and prejudice while participating in sports (Cunningham & Melton, 2012; Cunningham & Sagas, 2008). Researchers have found that gay men experience various psychological issues directly related to discrimination and prejudice (Cramer et al., 2013; Gough, 2007; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009). In recent years, the social climate has changed regarding gay rights due to the increasing visibility of gay activists (HRC Story, 2017; LGBT Rights, 2017). Moreover, several professional athletes have publically disclosed their sexuality (Hagler, 2012; Luisi et al., 2016), thereby providing an example for all gay men who participate in sports, both professional and amateur. Research has described the experiences of gay athletes; however, to date, qualitative research could not be located that addresses their coping strategies in sports environments. This study sought to understand the experiences of gay men who participate in amateur sports and their use of adaptive and/or maladaptive coping skills. A review of the relevant literature is provided in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The world of sports has long been associated with masculine behaviors and a resistance to homosexuality. As a result, gay men have encountered discrimination and prejudice due to homophobic and heterosexist behavior within sport culture. In recent years, however, the world has experienced significant change regarding gay rights, and public attitudes appear to be changing, even within the world of sports (Anderson, 2011; HRC Story, 2017; LGBT Rights, 2017). Current research demonstrates a changing perspective regarding the experiences of gay men in both professional and amateur sports (Anderson, 2011). Nevertheless, research also shows that prejudice toward gay men still exists to some degree in sport, resulting in some gay men not disclosing their sexual identity out of fear of negative consequences (Billings et al., 2015). During this study, references to gay men and sexual minorities are used interchangeably, since current studies on sexual minorities included the gay male population. Research shows that sexual minorities utilize adaptive and/or maladaptive coping strategies to manage minority stress and stigma (Meyer, 2013). Adaptive coping may include utilizing group support, reading, exercise, or sports, thereby resulting in decreased stress and improved physical health (Seiffge-Krenke, 2004; Sornberger, Smith, Toste & Heath, 2013). Contrarily, maladaptive coping may include internalized homophobia, substance abuse, denial, and suicidality, in turn, contributing to increased stress and poorer health outcomes (Seiffge-Krenke, 2004; Sornberger, Smith, Toste & Heath, 2013). To date, research could not be located that addresses the experiences of gay men in amateur sports

and their use of coping skills. Therefore, the problem this research addresses was the lack of qualitative studies on the experiences of gay men who participate in amateur sports and on their coping skills.

To begin, research strategies are presented to help with finding articles for future reference. The rest of this literature review presents key research that explores prejudice and discrimination encountered by gay men within sport in both historical and current contexts. This provides a better understanding of the physiological, social, and psychological effects that homophobia and sexual stigma have on gay men in sports environments. This review also provides insight into how sexual minorities use coping strategies, adaptive and maladaptive, to manage prejudice and discrimination. Finally, a review of the minority stress theory provides insight into how minority stress may influence coping mechanisms. In the world of sport, heterosexism is reinforced, thereby contributing to prejudice and discrimination against sexual minorities (Cunningham & Sagas, 2008). The question becomes how coping skills are influenced as a result of minority stress due to oppressive environments.

Research Strategies

Literature research was conducted using several sources of information. The Walden online library provided many of the needed peer-reviewed articles for this literature review. Thoreau Multi-Database Search and PsychInfo were accessed with general search terms *sport athletics* and *gay* as the root of all inquiries. Other search terms such as *prejudice*, *discrimination*, *cope*, and *coping* were used to further narrow the search. Using the articles located in these search portals, additional references were

located from a review of the references used by previous authors. To date, research could not be located that addresses the coping strategies of gay men in amateur sports. Hence, the contents of this review are limited to the impact of sexual prejudice and discrimination experienced by gay men in professional and amateur sports, in addition to reviewing the coping process and related strategies.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework was appropriate for this phenomenological study because the framework is structured from broad ideas to help properly identify the issue under study, and frame and provide clarity to the research question. The conceptual framework is coping skills of gay men in amateur sports. This study was framed according to the minority stress theory, which suggests that sexual minorities are subjected to excessive stress as a result of social stigmatization, internalized homophobia, and experience of prejudice (Meyer, 2013).

Minority stress theory.

According to Meyer (2013), sexual minorities are subjected to excessive stress as a result of social stigmatization. Meyer developed the minority stress theory based on stress literature, psychological theory, and mental health research within the lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) population. The theory suggests that minority stress results from two proximal or recent stressors (internalized homophobia and perceived stigma) and one distal stressor (prejudiced events) (Lea et al., 2014; Meyer, 2013). Internalized homophobia is related to the negative attitudes that society demonstrates towards homosexuality and then directing these negative feelings onto oneself (Lea et al., 2014;

Meyer, 2013). Perceived stigma is the perception of negative attitudes about homosexuality that gay individuals sense, and the expectation of prejudice and discrimination (Meyer, 2013). Prejudiced events include homophobic abuse, discrimination, and rejection (Meyer, 2013). Meyer claimed that both proximal and distal stressors add an additional level of psychosocial stress to sexual minorities, thereby influencing their coping mechanisms and contributing to mental health problems. Sexual minorities manage prejudice by means of coping skills and resilience; in particular, group solidarity provides a channel of support, thereby protecting minorities from the negative effects of minority stress (Meyer, 2013). Moreover, when group support is not available, then an individual may exhibit deficient coping skills (Meyer, 2013). For example, individuals who encounter sexual stigma or prejudice may decide to hide their sexual identity as a coping mechanism, yet this becomes a heavy burden to carry resulting in internal stress.

According to research, sexual minorities are at increased risk of mental health issues, such as depression, substance abuse, anxiety, and suicidality, compared to heterosexuals (Meyer, 2013; Mink et al., 2014; Sattler, Wagner, & Christiansen, 2016). The minority stress theory claims that sexual minorities encounter increased levels of stress due to negative societal attitudes and prejudice. Lea, Wit, and Reynolds (2014) conducted an online survey to examine the experience of minority stress, suicidality, psychological distress, and substance abuse in young adults who identify as gay in Australia; they studied the relationship between minority stressors and suicidality, psychological distress, and substance abuse problems. Minority stressors may have an

additional impact on psychosocial stressors and influence an individual's coping mechanism, thereby placing the individual at increased risk for mental health issues. Previous research has shown a relationship between higher levels of depression and internalized homophobia in addition to perceived stigma among gay youth (Berghe, Dewaele, Cox, & Vincke, 2010). The majority of participants reported low levels of internalized homophobia and perceived stigma; nevertheless, those who did report higher levels were also more susceptible to experience suicidality and psychological distress, thereby providing additional support to previous research (Lea et al., 2014). Moreover, the survey results showed higher rates of suicidality, psychological distress, and substance abuse among the gay participants compared to their heterosexual cohorts (Lea et al., 2014). The findings supported the minority stress theory that chronic stress related to sexual identity results in poorer mental health and more substance abuse problems (Lea et al., 2014). Although social attitudes have improved with increasing acceptance of same-sex attraction, this study's findings showed continued problems among gay youth related to poorer mental health and substance abuse issues (Lea et al., 2014).

As indicated, sexual minorities are at greater risk of health problems compared to heterosexuals. Sattler et al. (2016) examined data from an online survey completed by 1,118 gay men which sought to investigate the minority stress theory and how minority stressors predict mental health problems. Sattler's research results supported Meyer's (2013) minority stress theory in that victimization, rejection sensitivity, and internalized homophobia predict mental health issues. Internalized homophobia is a harmful internal stress resulting from absorbing negative stigma from others (Sattler et al., 2016). Even if

gay men can successfully hide their sexual identity, they may still hold negative societal values about themselves, and may begin to view self from an imagined perspective of how others feel (Meyer, 2013). The findings indicated that minority stress can be minimized by group-level coping and social support (Sattler et al., 2016), thereby providing valuable quantitative data related to coping skills.

Minority stress also results from encountering expectations and values within the dominant culture that conflict with the psychological needs and values of the minority group (Hill & Gunderson, 2015). Minority stress results from direct and indirect types of prejudice, discrimination, and social rejection. Furthermore, victimization, social rejection sensitivity, and internalized homonegativity are gay-related stressors that positively relate to mental health problems (Sattler et al., 2016). Hence, sexual minorities must regularly use personal resources to cope with stressful events, which may eventually overwhelm the individual's personal resources to cope successfully (Hill & Gunderson, 2015). However, it is important to note that the vast majority of sexual minority individuals do not develop significant psychological health problems nor experience suicide ideation (Cochran & Mays, 2013; Hill & Gunderson, 2015). Although these individuals encounter sources of stress that differ from the general population, they still function as well on a psychological level when compared to this population (Hill & Gunderson, 2015). Nevertheless, not all coping strategies are effective for maintaining or restoring mental health, as some stressful events may exceed one's personal abilities to successfully manage these events.

Research supports that sexual minorities experience increased levels of stress compared with the heterosexual population (Hill & Gunderson, 2015; Sattler et al., 2016). The men in my study also reported experiencing minority stress while participating in the world of sport. It is known that sport culture has long been a powerful institution for promoting hegemonic masculinity while defending traditional masculine roles of men (Hardin et al., 2009; Plummer, 2006). Research has documented the experiences of gay athletes and the overall resistance to homosexuality within the sport culture (Gough, 2007; Messner, 1992; Plummer, 2006). Although the social climate has changed toward gay men in sports, general acceptance and tolerance are not consistent across all demographics (Anderson, 2011). Prejudice and discrimination still exist, and homophobia becomes very evident for those who experience and cope with it (Cunningham & Melton, 2012; O'Brien, Shovelton, & Latner, 2013; Place & Beggs, 2011).

Literature Review

Research has shown the negative impact of prejudice and discrimination toward sexual minorities. In previous years, sports environments have particularly shown hostility and resistance to homosexuality (Cunningham & Sagas, 2008; Cunningham & Melton, 2012). Although the social climate is experiencing change, prejudice toward gay men still exists at some level within sports. The following literature review provides insight into what gay men experience in sports culture, and the negative consequences of discrimination and prejudice.

Sexual prejudice within sport.

Previous research has documented the experiences of gay men in sports culture and its resistance to homosexuality (Gough, 2007; Messner, 1992; Plummer, 2006). For example, Gough (2007) described the challenges encountered by gay men in sports. The author analyzed eight online qualitative accounts of gay men and their coming out experiences as professional and amateur athletes within both individual and team sports (Gough, 2007). The findings identified several prominent themes, including sport participation as a distraction from sexuality, isolation within sport, difficult yet rewarding coming out experience, and increased self-confidence to challenge heterosexism within sport (Gough, 2007). Several participants experienced depression, stress, and worry as they described their coming out experience to fellow teammates, in addition to experiencing an uncomfortable culture that promoted heteronormative dialog and behavior (Gough, 2007).

At the time of Gough's (2007) study, there were very few prominent athletes who had disclosed their sexual orientation. For example, United States Olympic high diver Louganis disclosed his sexuality only late in his career during the 1994 Gay Games in New York (Gough, 2007). In 1990, British soccer player Fashanu came out as gay during an exclusive interview and was immediately treated with hostility from his former teammates, the media, and his brother, who publicly expressed his disapproval (Gough, 2007). After facing a sexual assault allegation, Fashanu committed suicide in 1998 (Cleland, 2014). In 1991, Australian rugby player Roberts encountered hostility after his public disclosure (Gough, 2007). Therefore, Gough (2007) reported that the lack of

valuable role models for other gay players within sport contributed to feelings of isolation for gays within the industry. Some study participants also remarked that being a gay athlete was considered odd and did not fit the nonathletic gay stereotype (Gough, 2007). Although the overall experience of coming out to teammates was positive, the findings also showed that gay acceptance within sport did not come without conditions. For example, some participants remarked that their disclosure was at times accompanied by a reaction of joking, or they heard commentary that their sexuality should just be put aside or forgotten, which further supported how being gay may have been acceptable but it was not acceptable to appear or look gay, thereby promoting heteronormative dialog and behavior (Gough, 2007). Therefore, this study contributed to understanding the challenges of gay men in a sports culture resistant to homosexuality (Gough, 2007).

Homophobia is particularly evident when observing the behaviors of collegiate rugby players. Muir and Seitz (2004) conducted an observational study of 50 male collegiate rugby athletes over the span of 4 years in which data was collected via observation, interviews, and unsolicited dialog between players. The findings demonstrated an inherent homophobic culture through the use of denigrating jargon and behavior. Ritualistic behavior often involved players who ridiculed their opponents using terms such as *faggot* or *queer* (Muir & Seitz, 2004). Coaches and players often insulted each other using denigrating and feminized dialog during games or practice (Muir & Seitz, 2004). Those who did not meet the ideal masculine expectations were often called *sissies*, *fags*, or *pussies*, which often resulted in physical violence (Muir & Seitz, 2004). Traditional rugby songs served to promote the ideal masculinity but also degraded

women and effeminate men (Muir & Seitz, 2004). During the after-game parties, for example, players would sing victory songs by imitating feminine voices and gestures, such as holding a limp wrist and lisping, while others applauded and laughed at their feminized behavior (Muir & Seitz, 2004). When a player's sexual orientation was questioned, it was often encountered with anger and aggression, resulting in physical fights and arguments (Muir & Seitz, 2004). This homophobic dialog and behavior demonstrated a clear message about the power disparity between masculine and feminine, and the importance of masculinity as sports participants (Muir & Seitz, 2004).

In recent years, however, research has indicated that homophobia is decreasing within the sport culture, and is not present at the same level of hostility as a few decades ago. For example, Anderson (2011) examined 3 decades of research related to homophobia in sports, which indicated how levels of homophobia have decreased even within team sports. As the first American openly gay high school coach, Anderson described his negative experiences, including slander by the school administration, and constant bullying and physical harassment of his athletes by members of the football team, which finally resulted in abandoning his teaching career, and then obtaining a Ph.D. in sport sociology. Anderson (2011) reviewed how early research has shown that sport has long associated males with masculine dominance, thereby aligning with hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995; Plummer, 1999). However, Anderson argued that the hegemonic masculinity theory was applicable in the 1980s when Connell (1987) began constructing her theory. However, since then America has experienced dramatic social change toward gay men, thereby weakening the hegemonic masculinity theory in

today's social climate (Anderson, 2011). Anderson explained that the 1980s and 1990s placed enormous pressure on young boys to participate in specific sports or dance in masculine ways so as not to appear gay. Anderson's current research, however, demonstrated a shift in how heterosexual men are no longer fearful to behave in manners that were once perceived as gay, such as expressing verbal and physical affection for their male heterosexual friends. Although Anderson demonstrated that cultural homophobia has decreased, the author admitted that this is not consistent across all demographics, and that homophobia becomes quite evident when present.

Nevertheless, recent studies show that prejudice still exists within sports. In a qualitative study conducted by O'Brien et al. (2013), 409 male and female university students were surveyed regarding levels of antigay prejudice. One hundred and ninety-nine participants were physical education (PE) students, and the other participants were non-PE students enrolled in psychology, education, business, and biology courses. The authors claimed that individuals who are very engaged with sport culture, such as physical education and sport science, place high importance on physical abilities and appearance, and may manifest greater antigay prejudice (O'Brien et al., 2013). The research findings showed that PE students had significantly greater antigay prejudice than non-PE students, and that male PE students had significantly greater antigay prejudice than females. The study also found that antigay prejudice was significantly influenced by authoritarianism and social dominance orientation (SDO) amongst both PE and non-PE students (O'Brien et al., 2013). This study provided recent evidence of higher homophobia within sport culture compared to other settings (O'Brien et al., 2013).

Place and Beggs (2011) surveyed 1,151 participants to analyze the factors that motivate gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) members to participate in GLBT sporting leagues. Over the past 30 years, gay sports within GLBT organizations have become increasingly popular, providing an inclusive environment for members who often felt unwelcomed in mainstream sporting organizations (Place & Beggs, 2011). However, not everyone has welcomed gay sporting events. For example, the organizers of the 2006 Chicago Gay Games wanted to organize a rowing competition in a nearby town but residents were strongly opposed due to their perception of gay behavior (Place & Beggs, 2011). Another example involved the United States Olympic Committee who opposed the Gay Games being called “The Gay Olympic Games” since they believed that the GLBT was an inappropriate group to be associated with the Olympics (Place & Beggs, 2011). Therefore, the authors wanted to demonstrate to the public how sexual minorities have similar motivating factors as heterosexual athletes, and that there is nothing to fear with gay sporting events (Place & Beggs, 2011). The study used the Leisure Motivation Scale (LMS) to measure motivation in a sports setting, including areas related to intellectual development, relationship building, skills development, or stress relief (Place & Beggs, 2011). The findings showed that social factors, such as wanting to be active, keeping in shape physically, and using physical abilities, were the major contributors to motivating these gay athletes to participate in sports (Place & Beggs, 2011). Hence, this research demonstrated that the motivations of GLBT athletes were similar to mainstream athletes, providing an answer to city or organization officials who question the motives of gay athletes (Place & Beggs, 2011). This study also

underscored how prejudice against sexual minorities is present within sporting contexts (Place & Beggs, 2011). Although this study provided additional insight into the experiences of sexual minorities, research lacks qualitative analyses into their lived experiences.

Cunningham and Melton (2012) examined the level of prejudice among African-American, Asian, Latino, and White parents toward sexual minority coaches. The survey findings showed that the mean score for prejudice was low with all races; however, the findings did reveal how religious fundamentalism, sexism, and one's contact with sexual minorities influenced levels of prejudice between races (Cunningham & Melton, 2012). Sexism refers to attitudes maintained by people who associate males with masculinity and females with femininity; moreover, people often associate gay males with femininity which may lead to bias against sexual orientation (Cunningham & Melton, 2012). Religious fundamentalism is the belief that only one set of religious beliefs is deemed acceptable regarding the fundamental and basic truths about humanity and God (Cunningham & Melton, 2012). Although sexual minority prejudice was influenced differently by race (i.e., religious fundamentalism, sexism, contact with sexual minorities), a level of prejudice amongst parents was still present (Cunningham & Melton, 2012). It must be noted that any level of parental prejudice may still influence their children (Cunningham & Melton, 2012). Hence, the authors claimed that parents who manifest sexual prejudice are likely to influence their children's perspective and opinions of sexual minorities, thereby contributing to heterosexist behaviors in sport

(Cunningham & Melton, 2012). Therefore, this study highlighted that prejudice still exists, and that any type of prejudice has the potential to influence others.

Cavalier (2011) examined the experiences of 10 gay men employed in professional, collegiate, and club sports, nine of whom were previous athletes. Although five participants reported positive or neutral experiences in the workplace, the other five reported a hostile environment (Cavalier, 2011). Several participants described negative experiences related to their sexual identity, two of whom claimed to be fired because of being gay, and one participant reported harassment by NFL teammates by means of derogatory comments and gestures (Cavalier, 2011). The findings indicated that participants' perceptions of a negative environment were largely based on their prior experience as athletes and employees rather than an actual experience of hostility (Cavalier, 2011). As these individuals transitioned from active athletes into the sports workplace, some carried with them memories of their negative experiences in sport. Nevertheless, the authors highlighted that one's perception is still their reality (Cavalier, 2011). One participant admitted that his fears were probably unfounded; however, the presence of fear as a motivation to protect oneself is still a reality, as many participants were not willing to disclose their sexuality during their employment within the sport industry (Cavalier, 2011). As a result, decision-making, workplace behaviors, and potential friends or foes were determined by their perception of an unwelcoming environment to sexual minorities (Cavalier, 2011). Notwithstanding the shift to a more positive environment within sporting contexts, this study underscored that prejudice exists and is worthy of continued research (Cavalier, 2011). In the following section,

research is presented to provide additional insight into how sport culture has promoted heterosexism.

Heterosexism within sport.

A quantitative study conducted by Bandermann and Szymanski (2014) was designed to examine the impact of two types of heterosexist oppression as predictors of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD): 1) sexual orientation-based hate crime victimization according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) IV criteria and 2) heterosexist discrimination. The study's objective was to analyze how individuals coped with heterosexist oppression by means of internalization, detachment, and the use of alcohol and drugs (Bandermann & Szymanski, 2014). Research has shown that sexual minorities are at increased risk for traumatic life events, including psychological abuse and higher rates of PTSD compared to heterosexuals (Roberts, Austin, Corliss, Vandermorris, & Koenen, 2010). The authors focused on coping strategies used by sexual minorities when challenged by heterosexism (Bandermann & Szymanski, 2014). An online survey was used to collect data from 423 participants (Bandermann & Szymanski, 2014). The findings indicated that heterosexist discrimination significantly predicted PTSD symptoms just as sexual orientation-based crimes are significant predictors, which solidified the author's claims that traumatic events greatly influence mental health (Bandermann & Szymanski, 2014). Although heterosexist discrimination may not a present life-threatening situation, it may still cause emotional scars, and contribute to fear and hopelessness (Bandermann & Szymanski, 2014). The findings also indicated that coping mechanisms are influenced by

heterosexist discrimination by means of internalization, detachment, and alcohol and drug use (Bandermann & Szymanski, 2014).

In 2007, retired NBA player Amaechi publicly disclosed that he was gay, which received extensive media coverage in the United States. Hardin, Kuehn, Jones, Genovese, and Balaji (2009) analyzed the sports/media coverage to evaluate how columnists would position masculinity, sexuality, and homophobia in the context of Amaechi's story. The authors wondered how the changing social climate toward sexual minorities would influence the columnists to challenge homophobia (Hardin et al., 2009). Although the majority of the coverage openly condemned homophobic views, the columnists still reinforced homophobia in various ways (Hardin et al., 2009). By means of textual analysis, the authors found many negative terms used by the columnists that minimized Amaechi's coming out (Hardin et al., 2009). The sports/media coverage did condemn many of the antigay comments made about Amaechi, but trivialized them as merely a part of men's expected behavior within sport (Hardin et al., 2009). Instead of using the media as a platform to condemn homophobia within sport, the columnists indirectly reinforced the homophobic expectation within the industry (Hardin et al., 2009). This study underscored how the world of sports has continued to foster homophobia and heterosexist behavior (Hardin et al., 2009), highlighting the importance of understanding the lived experiences of gay men in sports.

Within sport culture, homosexuality and femininity represent a polar opposite to masculinity and power. Moreover, sport culture has long fostered hegemonic masculinity, thereby promoting cultural homophobia. The most powerful institution for

promoting hegemonic masculinity has been the world of sport, which has defended the traditional roles of men (Hardin et al., 2009; Plummer, 2006). Since sports are often perceived as masculine endeavors, female athletes are frequently viewed as masculine and assumed to be lesbian (Billings, Moscovitz, Rae, & Brown-Devlin, 2015; Hardin et al., 2009). Thus, when prominent gay male athletes publicly disclose their sexuality, it is instantly broadcasted by the media and the subject of ethnographic research to explore their experiences. Billings et al. (2015) conducted a quantitative content analysis of both traditional and social media related to the public disclosure of Jason Collins as the first professional athlete to publicly come out as a gay. The authors analyzed how newspapers and Twitter described Collins' disclosure and what they chose to highlight (Billings et al., 2015). By examining 7,556 online tweets and 364 traditional newspaper articles, the authors found that the themes of both media types emphasized a positive message about Collins' disclosure and highlighted this as a significant event for gay rights (Billings et al., 2015). Previous to Collins, professional athletes only disclosed their sexual orientation after retirement, so this was considered significant since Collins was the only athlete from among the four major American sports teams to come out as gay within an acknowledged homophobic culture (Billings et al., 2015). Since Collins' public disclosure, other prominent athletes have also come out as gay; however, it is not the norm, and still considered to be newsworthy. The authors underscored how these uncommon disclosures of professional athletes demonstrate that sporting environments continue to promote hegemonic masculinity and mandatory heterosexuality (Billings et al., 2015). Collins' public disclosure is considered a newsworthy event; however, it does

not signify the end of homophobia within sport or explain the continued pressures that gay athletes encounter to keep their sexuality hidden (Billings et al., 2015). Although media may celebrate these type of events, it still may present a false message that gay discrimination has ended within sport. Gay men continue to encounter challenges in sports, thereby requiring various coping strategies to manage the increased levels of stress (Cunningham & Melton, 2012; Meyer, 2013).

Coping.

For my study, it is important to describe how coping is defined and analyzed in the field of psychology. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined coping as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (p. 141). According to the authors, coping is a process and not a personal trait (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The process begins with primary appraisal in which an individual evaluates a stressful event as significant and exceeding one’s personal resources to manage (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Secondary appraisal involves the individual’s choice of coping strategies, involving problem-focused or emotion-focused coping, once the options for coping are appraised (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Coping assessment should focus on what the individual actually does during a stressful event rather than what the individual normally does; thus, coping should be analyzed within a specific context as this allows an analysis of the relationship between coping and the contextual demands encountered by the individual (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Lazarus and Folkman described that coping is a constantly changing process as an

individual encounters various stressful events. For example, an individual constantly appraises stressful events which then modifies the individual's appraisal of future stressful events. By means of this appraisal process, coping strategies are selected to suit a specific situation. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) also suggested that coping is not an automated or unconscious act, but a conscious behavior which is utilized when an individual determines that a stressful event is challenging or surpassing their resources.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identified two types of coping strategies: problem-focusing coping and emotion-focused coping. As the name indicates, problem-focused coping involves active problem-solving that modifies or seeks to control the source of stress caused by external events (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1989) further described specific behaviors related to problem-focused coping to include taking direct action, planning, evaluating the pros and cons, seeking help, and at times forcing oneself to wait before taking action. Emotion-focused coping involves an individual's internal emotional state and efforts to modify or reduce emotional stress caused by stressful events (Carver et al., 1989). Emotion-focused coping may include seeking social support, denial, or positive reinterpretation of stressful events (Carver et al., 1989). Although stressors may involve both types of coping, individuals will resort to problem-solving coping when they sense that something constructive can be done to alter the source of stress, whereas emotion-focused coping may be used when individuals sense that the stressor must be endured (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Carver et al., 1989). Maladaptive coping refers to situations in which an individual fails to control or manage a stressful event, and adaptive coping is when an individual finds a fit between a coping

strategy and a stressful event (Chesney, Neilands, Chambers, Taylor, & Folkman, 2006). Individuals experience fewer psychological issues when adaptive coping is utilized (Chesney et al., 2006). Maladaptive coping strategies may include withdrawal, risky behavior, drug or alcohol use, and physically hurting oneself, whereas adaptive coping may include seeking social support, reading, playing sports, exercise, reading, or figuring out options to deal with the problem (Seiffge-Krenke, 2004; Sornberger, Smith, Toste & Heath, 2013).

Yeatts and Lochbaum (2013) differentiated between coping style and coping strategy. Coping style is how an individual typically responds to stress, while coping strategy is how well an individual manages a specific situation (Yeatts & Lochbaum, 2013). Thus, an individual's particular coping style influences the coping strategy to be used during stressful events. In order to analyze coping style, the authors investigated the relationship of personality and achievement motivation on the coping style of 258 participants actively engaged in fitness (Yeatts & Lochbaum, 2013). The *Coping Function Questionnaire for Sport* was used to assess coping style, such as problem, emotion, and avoidance (Yeatts & Lochbaum, 2013). Problem-focused or approach-focused coping includes actions that intend to modify a stressful event in which the individual seeks to alter the relationship between oneself and the source of stress (Nicholls & Polman, 2008). Emotion-focused coping entails the purposeful regulation of distress including relaxation and positive self-talk (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Nicholls & Polman, 2008). On the other hand, avoidance coping includes intentional behavior that distances oneself from the stressful event (Nicholls & Polman, 2008). The Big Five

model was used to assess the five basic personality traits: extraversion, neuroticism, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Yeatts & Lochbaum, 2013). The findings indicated that extraversion predicted problem-focused coping, while neuroticism predicted avoidance coping (Yeatts & Lochbaum, 2013). Also, there was a positive relationship between approach temperament and problem-focused coping, and avoidance temperament and avoidance coping (Yeatts & Lochbaum, 2013). Both approach and avoidance temperaments play a role in motivation (Yeatts & Lochbaum, 2013). Hence, this study demonstrated how personality traits predicted coping efforts when encountering a variety of stressful events.

Afshar et al. (2015) also conducted a study to examine the relationship between the five personality traits and coping styles using a large sample of 4,628 participants. Several instruments were used to gather information related to demographics, health, personality traits, and coping style (Afshar et al., 2015). For coping style, a self-administered coping strategies questionnaire included 23 items and five subscales: positive reinterpretation and growth, problem engagement, avoidance, seeking support, and acceptance (Afshar et al., 2015). The findings indicated that adaptive personality traits were positively associated with active coping styles, and negatively associated with avoidance coping (Afshar et al., 2015). Additionally, maladaptive personality traits, such as neuroticism, were positively associated with avoidance coping, and negatively associated with active coping styles (Afshar et al., 2015). Openness and conscientiousness were significantly positively associated with problem management, and extraversion and agreeableness were significantly positively associated with positive

reinterpretation and growth (Afshar et al., 2015). Individuals with neuroticism demonstrated poor adaptive and ineffective coping (Afshar et al., 2015). Therefore, the findings showed how personality traits may influence the effectiveness of coping styles, and what may be effective for one personality type may prove ineffective for another.

In order to cope with stress, Compas (2006) described how cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and biological processes help an individual either to avoid its source or adjust to the source of stress. Compas suggested that automatic and controlled processes are activated in response to stress. Automatic responses may include impulsive, emotional, and physiological reactions, while controlled processes are voluntary reactions that are involved in the process of coping (Compas, 2006). An individual's capacity to cope may be influenced by cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and biological development, either contributing to or limiting one's resources to respond to stress (Compas, 2006). Coping involves self-regulatory processes that are intentionally and voluntarily employed to respond to stress (Compas, 2006). Coping may be characterized into three main categories: primary control coping or problem solving; secondary control coping or adapting by means of positive thinking; and disengagement coping, involving denial and avoidance (Compas, 2006).

Lazarus (2006) suggested that an individual's well-being is related to how well the individual copes with stress. According to Lazarus, stress is a natural component of life, which also requires the use of coping skills. If coping skills are deficient, however, then negative consequences result with poor health, social functioning, and confidence (Lazarus, 2006). On the contrary, if coping skills are effective, then an individual is more

than likely to keep stress at manageable levels (Lazarus, 2006). Additionally, individuals who effectively cope with stress are breaking personal mental barriers and reaching beyond their personal capacities, in turn, making their lives more rewarding (Lazarus, 2006). In this sense, stress does not always have to be negative but can be used to help one achieve more than what was anticipated by the individual (Lazarus, 2006).

Furthermore, Miquelon and Vallerand (2008) suggested a positive relationship between adaptive coping mechanisms and improved physical health, and a relationship between maladaptive coping mechanisms and poorer health outcomes. Coping mechanisms involve the efforts that individuals use to minimize, tolerate, or control stressful events. The authors' integrative model of motivation and health consequences posits that autonomous goals increase happiness and self-realization, while controlled goals stifle them (Miquelon & Vallerand, 2008). According to the self-determination theory (SDT), autonomous goals are aligned with the interest of the genuine self, thereby contributing to better mental health outcomes (Miquelon & Vallerand, 2008). On the other hand, controlled goals are those established by internal or external pressures, including guilt and rewards, which are not truly aligned with the deeper self (Miquelon & Vallerand, 2008). The model also suggests that self-realization, active efforts to manage challenge, contributes to better health outcomes because it provides protection against stressful events or does not allow those stressful events to take one's life (Miquelon & Vallerand, 2008). Therefore, it is important to identify adaptive coping skills that contribute to improved health outcomes. Hence, the purpose of my research was to identify how gay men use coping strategies in the world of sport.

Coping skills and sexual orientation.

Research supports that sexual minorities encounter increased stress compared with those who identify as heterosexual (Meyer, 2013). Physiologic consequences, known as the allostatic load, may result when individuals are subjected to chronic or repeated stress (Everett, Rosario, McLaughlin, & Austin, 2014; McEwen, 2015). This repeated wear and tear on the body increases over time as individuals are exposed to this type of stress. As a result, sexual minorities may use various coping skills, adaptive or maladaptive, to manage stress levels. Sornberger et al. (2013) conducted a survey of 207 university students who self-identified as lesbian/gay, bisexual, or questioning (LGBQ) and a heterosexual comparison group to examine the relationship between sexual orientation and non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI), and the relationship between sexual orientation and coping behaviors. For this literature review, however, the latter objective is of prime interest because this was the first study to specifically investigate sexual orientation and the overall use of both adaptive and maladaptive coping skills. Coping behaviors may be either adaptive or maladaptive; in other words, these behaviors can either benefit or negatively impact the person's overall mental health. The authors used a self-report questionnaire that included various maladaptive strategies, such as engaging in risky behavior, getting into arguments, eating, stopping eating, getting into arguments, and physically hurting oneself, and adaptive strategies, such as reading, listening to music, talking to someone, praying, exercising, and playing sports (Sornberger et al., 2013). The findings indicated a complex relationship between sexual orientation and coping skills, and did not suggest that LGBQ individuals are deficient with adaptive

copied skills compared with the heterosexual comparison group (Sornberger et al., 2013). Interestingly, the range of overall coping skills appeared to be equal to or greater than the heterosexual participants (Sornberger et al., 2013). The use of coping skills is aligned with Meyer's (2013) minority stress theory, as minority individuals who encounter increased levels of stress react either with adaptive or maladaptive behavior to cope with such stress.

Coping instruments.

My study addressed coping skills by means of qualitative research; however, it is appropriate to review other widely used approaches to measure coping. To quantitatively evaluate the coping process, Lazarus and colleagues originally developed the Ways of Coping measure, currently named the Ways of Coping Questionnaire (WAYS; Folkman & Lazarus, 2005), in which participants use a multi-point scale to indicate the degree of coping used (i.e., coping thought or action) during a stressful event (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). The WAYS has been widely used by researchers to measure thoughts and behaviors by individuals dealing with internal and external stressors (Kieffer & MacDonald, 2011). The WAYS is a 66-item scale based on two types of coping, problem-focused and emotion-focused, and involves eight coping strategies: confrontive coping, distancing, self-controlling, seeking social support, accepting responsibility, escape-avoidance, planful problem solving, and positive reappraisal (Kieffer & MacDonald, 2011). The responses are then factor-analyzed to determine general patterns of coping (Kieffer & MacDonald, 2011). The total score reliability estimates for the total scale of the WAYS and each of its subscales were acceptable (Kieffer & MacDonald,

2011). For all the WAYS subscales, the mean score reliability exceeded .69, with Confrontive Coping, Distancing, Accepting Responsibility, and Self-Controlling subscales just under the Crocker and Algina criterion of .70 (Kieffer & MacDonald, 2011).

The COPE inventory is another widely used quantitative instrument. Developed by Carver et al. (1989), it consists of a 60-item scale that evaluates 15 distinct coping strategies. Participants report to what degree they typically use a coping strategy during a stressful event based on a 4-point Likert-type scale using the range “I (usually) don’t do this at all” (1) to “I (usually) do this a lot” (4), and the scale evaluates how individuals respond during these events (Carver et al., 1989). The COPE scales have shown internal consistency, resulting in acceptably high values for Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficients, with most scales ranging from .62 to .92, and with only one scale falling below .60 (Carver et al., 1989). The COPE evaluates active versus avoidant coping strategies, which include active coping, planning, seeking instrumental social support, seeking emotional social support, suppression of competing activities, religion, positive reinterpretation and growth, restraint coping, resignation/acceptance, focus on and venting of emotions, denial, mental disengagement, behavioral disengagement, alcohol/drug use, and humor (Carver et al., 1989).

The coping self-efficacy (CSE) scale is a 26-item measure of an individual’s confidence in performing coping behaviors when encountering life challenges, in addition to providing a way to evaluate changes in CSE over time with coping intervention research (Chesney et al., 2006). Three major aspects of coping are included:

problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and social support (Chesney et al., 2006). All three factors demonstrate internal consistency with a strong baseline coefficient alpha, ranging from .80 for *get support from friends and family* to .91 for *use problem-focused coping and stop unpleasant emotions* (Chesney et al., 2006). In addition, the test-retest baseline correlation coefficients were strong, ranging from .40 to .80 (Chesney et al., 2006).

Quantitative methodologies provide insight into what factors influence the choice of coping strategies used under duress or the frequency with which individuals utilize coping strategies. However, my research used qualitative methodology to investigate how sexual prejudice may impact the psychological wellbeing of gay men in amateur sports and may provide additional support to existing quantitative research. My study used individual interviews to explore why gay men use specific coping strategies to manage stressful events, as described in Chapter 3.

Summary of Chapter 2

Research has shown that prejudice toward gay men still exists to some degree in sport, resulting in some gay men not disclosing their sexual identity out of fear of negative consequences (Cavalier, 2011; Hardin et al., 2009; O'Brien et al., 2013). Moreover, it is known that sexual minorities encounter greater stress compared to heterosexuals (Hill & Gunderson, 2015; Sattler et al., 2016). What is not known, however, is how gay men utilize coping strategies in the world of amateur sport. Due to these gaps in the literature, this study focused on the coping skills of gay men in amateur sports. As a sexual minority, gay men who participate in sports may utilize various

coping strategies, adaptive or maladaptive, or a combination of strategies to manage, minimize, or control levels of stress. The minority stress theory provided insight into how these gay men experience increased stress, how coping skills are influenced by minority stress, and which coping strategies are employed to manage stress (Meyer, 2013). The purpose of this study was to better understand how gay men in amateur sports utilize coping skills. Chapter 3 provides information on how this study was conducted, how the participants were identified, the interview questions asked, and how the information was collected, organized, and analyzed.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The two previous chapters described the experiences of gay men in sports environments, including the prejudice and discrimination often encountered. Historically, the sports culture has been a powerful institution for promoting hegemonic masculinity, thereby defending traditional roles for men (Cunningham & Sagas, 2008). In recent years, however, the world has experienced significant change regarding gay rights, and public attitudes appear to be changing even within the world of sports (Anderson, 2011; HRC Story, 2017; LGBT Rights, 2017). Nevertheless, homophobic behavior and dialog still exist, thereby contributing to stress for gay men who participate in sports. As a result, coping mechanisms, adaptive and/or maladaptive, are used by gay men to minimize, tolerate, or control stress (Meyer, 2013; Sornberger et al., 2013). What is not known, however, is how gay men in amateur sports use coping skills in sports environments. Therefore, the problem this research addressed was the lack of qualitative studies on the experiences of gay men who participate in amateur sports and their use of coping skills. The minority stress theory provided additional insight into this unknown experience. This chapter describes the qualitative method used to understand the experiences of gay men in amateur sports.

Research Methodology

Qualitative methodology was selected to analyze the research topic that requires exploration. Qualitative researchers become the key instrument for data collection. By means of semistructured interviews and observation, I gathered, organized, and reviewed

the data. The qualitative process began with inductive reasoning that included observation, real example, and exploration. As the analysis progressed, I used deductive reasoning to review the data to determine if additional information was required.

Research Design

In this study, phenomenological research was the design selected to explore the experiences of gay men who are engaged in amateur sports. This approach helped me to understand the cultural and social aspects that influenced the athlete's participation and experience in a heteronormative culture, which included conflict, joys, and trials. A phenomenological study includes a description of the essence of the experience by incorporating *what* the participants have experienced and *how* they experienced it.

Phenomenology focuses on gathering data from people's experiences in life and describes the common understanding of the participants with their own lived experience of the research phenomenon (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). The study was based on my interpretations using both inductive and deductive reasoning processes to identify themes. Based on the collected data, I developed a complete description of all the participants as a whole.

After considering other qualitative designs, phenomenological research was shown to be more effective in providing the insight required to understand what these gay men experience. For example, narrative researchers focus on collecting stories from one or two individuals, and developing a narrative based on the of an individual's life (Creswell, 2013). Grounded theory focuses on generating a theory from the ground up as the researcher's objective is to discover theory based on the information obtained from

the participants (Creswell, 2013). Theory becomes the end point, in that the researcher utilizes the data obtained from the participants for developing a specific theory related to the study (Creswell, 2013). With case studies, the researcher provides a summary of interpretations and claims based on providing an in-depth understanding of a contemporary case or multiple cases (Creswell, 2013). The study's conclusion often provides insight from the researcher regarding the overall importance and meaning attributed to the case analysis. Ethnographers begin with a theory or a broad explanation as to what they hope to discover regarding cultural beliefs and ideologies (Creswell, 2013). Ethnography requires extensive fieldwork in order to provide a rich source of information (Creswell, 2013). This theoretical approach basically becomes an advocate for these groups, providing visibility to issues or problems encountered by these particular groups (Creswell, 2013). Consequently, these other research designs were not selected because their objectives do not seek to explore the current experiences or what has been experienced related to the phenomenon under study.

Participants of the Study

For qualitative inquiry, Creswell (2013) recommended a heterogeneous group ranging from 3 to 15 participants. In this study, participants included a minimum of eight men but no more than 10, based on criterion sampling in which all participants must have experienced the same phenomenon. Hence, criterion sampling was used to purposefully select participants who assisted the researcher to better understand the phenomenon. Moreover, snowball sampling assisted me in locating additional participants, in which a few originally contacted participants initiated contact with other potential participants

(Griffith, Morris, & Thakar, 2016). Interviews were conducted until saturation was obtained, which occurred after the final interview when no new ideas were expressed. The study confined itself to researching gay men who participate in sports. Sports have long been recognized as leading promoters of masculinity, and traditionally relate boys and men to masculine dominance (Anderson, 2009; Cavalier, 2011). Plummer (2006) reported that sports have been especially problematic for gay youth and gay young men, including alienation and bullying. Therefore, gay males participating in sports provide additional insight for the phenomenon and how coping skills are utilized in this context.

Participants were selected by means of personal reference inquiry. Personal references were instrumental for contacting individuals who are known to actively participate and/or compete in sports. A letter describing the study was sent to all potential volunteers. An example letter is located in Appendix A.

Measures

The purpose of this study was to determine how gay men in amateur sports utilize coping skills. Gay men participating in amateur sports were selected. The broad, overarching research question to better understand the participants' experiences is as follows. A list of questions used in the primary interview with the participants are located in Appendix B.

Research Question

How do gay men in amateur sports utilize coping skills?

Informed Consent and Ethical Protection of Participants

Prior to contacting potential participants or completing any research for this current study, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Walden University assessed and approved the study plan. The IRB approval number for this study is 11-04-16-0390567 with an expiration date of November 3, 2017.

At the beginning of each interview, I reviewed the informed consent and statement of confidentiality form and the participant was asked to sign the document if not already signed beforehand. I explained that participation was entirely voluntary and that participants had the right to terminate participation at any time. Each participant was informed that their personal identity would remain completely confidential, and that personal identifiers would be removed from the transcripts. There was no harm associated with participation in this study. All research resources, including interview transcripts, audiotapes, and files, are securely stored in a locked file cabinet in the my office. Only I and authorized individuals have access to secured transcripts in order to validate the data results. Prior to data validation, identifying information was removed from the transcripts, and personal names were replaced with alias names.

Procedures

The following procedures served as a sequential guide to select and inform participants, collect and analyze data, and validate data findings.

1. Locate potential participants by means of personal references and snowball sampling, and contact via telephone or email.

2. Provide informative letter to participant that describes the nature of the study, and the informed consent and statement of confidentiality.
3. Schedule individual interviews with selected participants to take place in a location that assures privacy and the safety of the participants.
4. At the beginning of the interview, review with the participant the study's intent and the signed informed consent and statement of confidentiality.
5. Conduct the individual interview with the participant, based on the researcher-designed interview protocol in Appendix A.
6. At the end of the interview, review the interview notes with the participant to ensure accuracy.
7. Provide a copy of the interview transcript to each participant to ensure accuracy.
8. Find one graduate student who has successfully completed a qualitative methods course at Walden University to assist in validating themes extracted from transcripts, and to adhere to the ethical protection of participants previously identified in this proposal. Provide a confidentiality agreement form to be signed.
9. Disseminate study's results to participants.

Data Collection

Data was collected by means of individual semistructured interviews at a location agreed upon by both researcher and participant. The interview began with building rapport, signing the consent form, and collecting information about the individual's background. The interview addressed the details of the participant's present experience by asking focused questions that were based on this study's primary research question.

In-depth interviews were conducted in person and, in the event an in-person interview was not possible, then the interview was conducted via telephone. During the interview process, I used a prepared list of primary open-ended questions (see Appendix A). However, additional probing questions were asked throughout the conversation with the participant, such as: Why does this stand out in your memory? What motivated this behavior? Is this a fair summary of what you just described? In this manner, information obtained was both clear and meaningful for this study. The duration of the interview was scheduled for 1 hour, but varied from one participant to the other. Due to the sensitivity of the research topic, I responded to the participants' feelings neutrally, and did not suggest or evaluate any coping skills during the interview.

Both in-person and telephone interviews were recorded via field notes with the informed consent of the participant. Field notes also included recording nonverbal communication such as gestures, voice intonation, and facial expressions, in addition to details of the environment. If a participant consented to audio recording, then the use of audio recording software was used in addition to field notes. Due to the sensitivity of the research topic, audio recording was not a requirement in order to promote a safe and communicative environment. The informed consent and statement of confidentiality included a section for the option of using audio recording. According to Clausen (2012), qualitative interviews can be accomplished without the use of audio recording while not affecting reliability, validity, and transparency. By means of semistructured interviews, I thoroughly planned the interview with focused themes, informed the participants in advance about the interview's purpose, and engaged the participant to validate the

notetaking as a collaborative effort with the researcher (Clausen, 2012). At the conclusion of the interview, I thanked the participant for their time and contribution to the research topic. I informed the participants that they will receive a copy of their own transcription by mail or email for additional verification. In the event audio recording software was used, interview transcriptions were produced with transcription software, which I verified for accuracy.

Data Analysis

Once the data were organized, I sought to understand the overall meaning of the data provided. First and foremost, my own experience was bracketed by providing a full description of my own personal experience and beliefs of the phenomenon, thereby paving a way for focus on the study's participants. This bracketing is an important component that helps to remove prejudices or assumptions of the study, and enables me to investigate the phenomenon with a fresh start. Afterwards, I read each transcript in its entirety to gain a general sense of the meaning conveyed by the participant, which was the first step in data analysis.

The second step involved developing a list a significant statements found in the interviews that described *how* the participants experienced the phenomenon. In this case, I highlighted statements to gain a deeper understanding of the experience of gay men in sports and whether or not the participants experienced minority stress. These statements were then grouped into themes or meaning units. This step also included the process of elimination, removing meaning units that were not required for understanding the experience of the phenomenon.

The third step was the process of labeling the statements. In this case, I labeled the meaning units according to expressions that represented behaviors, emotions, and feelings of the participants related to their experience of the phenomenon. The last step included the development of individual and group descriptions, describing *what* the participants experienced by providing verbatim examples of these multiple experiences, and structural descriptions, describing *how* the experience occurred. I formed individual descriptions by reviewing the psychological expressions. Key patterns were then clustered into a composite description of a group of gay men who have experienced the same phenomenon, thereby providing a better understanding of their shared experience.

This approach is very appropriate because a phenomenological study seeks to address the essence of the lived and shared experienced of the phenomenon under study. The study's participants were gay men in amateur sports, and the study sought to understand the experiences of these men. Using this data analysis method, the varied data was spread out with all the statements bearing equal weight, and then organized into meaningful clusters. I then removed repetitive or redundant data so that themes were analyzed. By examining the *how* and *what* of the experience, I explored the deeper meanings of the participants, who ultimately made up the group. The main objective of this study was to provide deeper meaning of the essence of the experience for this group of men; therefore, the data analysis technique provided an efficient method of organization and systematically analyzed the collected experiences.

Significant statements were copied into an Excel spreadsheet to continue the data analysis. As each statement was examined, categories were assigned based on the overall

meaning of the statement. Next, the data analysis involved the clustering of core categories and the development of themes. I maintained backup copies in a secure location at my home office in the event of data loss or data corruption.

Verification of Findings

Verification of findings was achieved by means of member checking, peer review, providing a rich, thick description, and clarifying researcher bias (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). Member checking was a process in which participants were asked to verify data and its resulting interpretations (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). I formulated questions based on the findings to elicit information from the participants regarding the credibility of the composite description of their experiences. Each participant received a copy of their interview transcript by email for verification. All data were verified through this process of member checking.

Peer review engaged the assistance of a fellow graduate student at Walden University who is educated in qualitative research. The purpose for using a knowledgeable peer was to help validate how the transcripts aligned with the developed themes, and to have an experienced researcher challenge the emerging theories developed from the researcher's perspective (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). Copies of the original transcripts and their resulting interpretations, including the individual and composite descriptions, were sent to the peer for validation.

Verification of findings was also obtained by providing a rich, thick description. A thick description improves the transferability of the analysis, thereby allowing the reader to transfer information from this research setting to other settings based on shared

characteristics of the phenomenon (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). This research provided verbatim transcripts, peer review notes, and direct quotes from the participants next to psychological expressions. Hence, confirmability was enhanced by means of thorough record keeping and preservation of data.

Furthermore, I clarified existing biases related to this study. The future value of the study may be compromised if my expectations influence the data collection and subsequent analysis. I was cognizant of my experiences and bracketed them accordingly. I have not competed in sports; however, I have been an eyewitness to the discrimination and marginalization of sexual minorities. Therefore, I bracketed my own personal perceptions and experiences by means of documenting preconceived beliefs.

Summary of Chapter 3

The purpose of the phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of gay men in amateur sports and their use of coping skills. Study participants included 8 to 10 gay men who actively participate in sports. By means of semistructured interviews, I individually interviewed each participant by asking qualitative questions that sought to understand the shared experience of these participants. A researcher-designed interview protocol was used to guide the interview process, in addition to asking probing questions to obtain a rich and meaningful interview experience. I ensured participant protection by providing an informed consent and statement of confidentiality. All personal identifiers were removed from the transcripts and replaced with alias names. Verification of findings was obtained by means of member checking, peer review, providing a thick description, and clarifying researcher bias (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). The

implications for positive social change include a better understanding of the experiences of gay men in amateur sports and to identify positive coping strategies. Chapter 4 reviews the data collection, summarizes the interview data, including specific categories and themes that emerged from the data using quotations as needed to emphasize their importance.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experience of gay men in amateur sports and identify the coping skills, whether adaptive or maladaptive, utilized in sports environments. The phenomenological method focused on what the participant experienced, and sought to describe and clarify the meanings of these lived experiences. The implications for positive social change include a better understanding of gay men's experience in amateur sports and the potential to identify positive coping strategies.

The following research question was used in this phenomenological study and provided the foundation for the in-depth interview questions:

How do gay men in amateur sports utilize coping skills?

This chapter also provides the findings of the in-depth interviews of gay men who participate in amateur sports, and it presents the results of the analyses. My study explores the experiences of the participants who share the same phenomenon and describes the common understanding of the participants with their own lived experience of the research phenomenon.

Setting

Interviews were conducted at a location agreed upon by both researcher and participant. I communicated with each participant by means of email to provide the Letter to Participant (Appendix A) and the informed consent and statement of confidentiality form. Prior to commencing the in-depth interview, I expressed

appreciation and thanked the participant for their time. I provided a general overview of the research topic and the objective of the interview. The participant provided a signed copy of the informed consent to me if a signed copy had not already been obtained prior to the interview. I reviewed the option of audio recording as outlined in the informed consent, and ensured that the option to agree or disagree to the use of audio recording was selected. Participants were reminded that they would obtain a copy of the transcription for review. In addition, participants were informed that they could terminate the interview at any time for any reason.

During the interview, I repeated main comments made by participants so that meaning was clarified. I used an interview guide (see Appendix B) to ensure the main questions were asked to each participant. Additionally, probing questions were used throughout each interview, as described in Chapter 3, so that deeper insight was gained by the researcher.

Demographics

Eight men who met the research criteria were selected to participate in this study. All participants identified as gay and have competed in either team or individual sports. Participants ranged in age from 23 through 52. Additional demographics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Participants' Demographic Information

Identifier	Age	Sport	Heterosexual or Gay Team
P1	23	Runner/track and field	Heterosexual
P2	32	Swimming	Heterosexual
P3	39	Tennis, soccer	Heterosexual and gay
P4	52	Running, football, basketball	Heterosexual
P5	34	Cross country, running, wrestling, track, volleyball	Heterosexual and gay
P6	33	Gymnastics, track, volleyball, basketball	Heterosexual
P7	37	Basketball, club volleyball	Heterosexual and gay
P8	30	Volleyball, racquetball, track	Heterosexual

Participant 1.

Participant P1 was a 23-year-old gay male. He is currently a competitive track and field athlete in college. He has played and competed only on straight teams including volleyball and other sports. He is currently out to his family, friends, and teammates. He disclosed his sexual orientation in a public manner via Facebook, and he described various reactions from teammates ranging from acceptance to pretending it did not happen, and silent disapproval. Nevertheless, he reported being respected amongst his teammates and viewed them as brothers. To cope with stress, P1 worked harder at his sport, sought out friends for support, and modified his behavior and conversation in heteronormative situations.

Participant 2.

Participant P2 was a 32-year-old gay male. He was a competitive swimmer throughout high school. He has played and competed only on straight swim teams from childhood through college. Gay swim teams were never an available option. He did not disclose his sexual orientation to his teammates. He expressed fear, shame, and

embarrassment about his teammates discovering his sexual orientation. To cope with stress, P2 sought out religion, support from relatives, psychotherapy, and modified his behavior and conversation in heteronormative situations.

Participant 3.

Participant 3 was a 39-year-old gay male. He has played in competitive sports, including soccer, softball, and tennis. P3 grew up playing competitive sports, and he has played on both straight and gay teams. He currently plays on a gay softball team. As a gay man, he described adapting to playing sports in a heteronormative sports culture. He does not automatically disclose his sexual orientation and expressed fear of judgment within the workplace. However, he expressed experiencing relief once his teammates learned of his orientation, whereas prior to disclosure P3 felt fear and some stress. As a gay man, P3 copes by learning to adapt and expressed indifference to playing sports in a heteronormative sports culture.

Participant 4.

Participant P4 was a 52-year-old gay male. He has played in competitive sports since childhood, including running, football, and basketball. He has only played on straight teams and did not disclose his sexual orientation to his teammates for fear of unknown reactions and potential animosity. He experienced discomfort, unhappiness, and pressure when interacting with heterosexual teammates. During stressful situations, P4 would alter his behavior to appear tough and masculine.

Participant 5.

Participant P5 was a 34-year-old gay male. He has played in competitive sports since childhood, including cross-country, running, wrestling, volleyball, and track. He has played on both straight and gay teams. During high school, he only played on straight teams and did not disclose his sexual orientation. He grew up in a small town where homophobia was prevalent. After high school, he moved to Chicago where he joined gay volleyball and cheerleading leagues since that option was available. P5 expressed anxiety prior to disclosing his sexual orientation, whereas he expressed relief after disclosure. To cope with stressful situations, he reported working harder at his sport, modifying his behavior, and staying under the radar.

Participant 6.

Participant P6 was a 33-year-old gay male. He has played in competitive sports, including gymnastics, track, volleyball, and basketball. He grew up in a very small Christian community in rural Michigan and received a great deal of negative attention based on people's assumption of his sexual orientation. He only played on straight teams, as gay teams were not an option. During high school, he never disclosed his sexual orientation to his teammates, whereas he was already out during college when he joined the intramural volleyball team. Prior to his disclosure, he experienced depression, whereas after he disclosed his orientation he felt empowered and likened it to a weight being lifted off his shoulders. During stressful situations, P6 resorted to working harder at this sport, modifying his behavior to appear gay, ignoring the problem, and becoming introverted at times.

Participant 7.

Participant P7 was a 37-year-old gay male. He has played in competitive sports, including basketball and club volleyball. During high school, he played basketball on a straight team, whereas in later years he joined both gay and straight club volleyball teams. For the past several years, he has been playing with the NAGVA (North American Gay Volleyball Association). Since he plays with both straight and gay teams, P7 used the term *code switch* to describe how vocabulary and mannerisms would change depending on whether he was playing with straight or gay teammates. Although he reported feeling comfortable with both straight and gay teams, he does intentionally hold back from automatically disclosing his orientation until he assesses his emotional safety. To cope with potentially stressful situations, P7 has modified his behavior, covered his sexual orientation, and avoided the topic of sexual orientation until a comfort level was obtained.

Participant 8.

Participant P8 was a 29-year-old gay male. He has competed in intramural track in college and plays volleyball, racquetball, and runs marathons. He competed only on straight teams in college, and has played with both straight and gay volleyball teams. P8 did not disclose his sexual orientation in high school, and experienced discomfort and unhappiness, whereas, after disclosure, he expressed feeling less stress, freer, and not having to hide anymore. P8 described how strenuous exercise and close friends have helped him to cope with stressful situations. Additionally, he reported intentionally distancing himself from potentially discriminatory people and circumstances.

Data Collection

The data collection process began by identifying potential research participants using personal references, as described in Chapter 3. Each potential participant was initially contacted either by phone or email in which I explained the research topic and interview process, and validated eligibility. Each selected participant was emailed an informative letter that described the nature of the study in addition to the informed consent and statement of confidentiality. There was a total of eight participants. Upon receipt of the signed informed consent, I contacted the participant to establish the location and time of the interview. Prior to each interview, I reviewed with the participant the study's intent and the signed informed consent and statement of confidentiality. Based on participant agreement to audio recording, as outlined in the informed consent form, audio recording software was used during the duration of the interview.

The interview protocol met the objectives of this study; therefore, no change was required to the original interview questions. Additionally, I took field notes to capture key expressions including nonverbal signals that participants gave during the interview. At the end of the interview, I reviewed the interview notes with the participant. The average interview was approximately 1 hour in length.

I manually transcribed the taped conversations and the transcripts were sent to the participants for validation prior to data analysis. Moreover, a graduate student who successfully completed a qualitative methods course at Walden University assisted in validating themes extracted from the transcripts. In addition, the graduate student signed a Confidentiality Agreement form acknowledging that information must remain

confidential; nonetheless, all participant-identifying information was removed prior to validation.

Data Analysis

The Modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method was used to conduct the data analysis of this phenomenological study (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The steps in this method included the bracketing of my own experience, horizontalization of the data in which significant statements are listed, constructing textural and structural descriptions of the experience, and developing a composite description to include the *what* and *how* of the overall experience of participants.

Epoche.

Epoche or bracketing is an important step to remove prejudices or assumptions of the study in which the researcher brackets his own experience to effectively manage any potential bias (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, I sought to identify any bias by providing a full description of my own personal experience of the phenomenon and to reflect only the experiences and beliefs of the research participants. This step is important so that any assumptions are removed, thereby allowing me to investigate the phenomenon with a fresh start.

During this time of increased awareness of human rights, I have witnessed discrimination and prejudice against sexual minorities. Therefore, I had to bracket my own beliefs and experiences to investigate the phenomenon with a fresh start to allow the participants' experiences to be the focal point of the study. I did not compare any of my own experiences to the experiences of the participants, and intentionally withheld any

contributory opinions or beliefs during the in-depth interviews. The next step in data analysis includes horizontalization of the data.

Horizontalization.

Data analysis included horizontalization of the interview data in which each relevant statement was assigned equal weight and became a horizon or segment of meaning of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). All interview transcripts were thoroughly reviewed. Each statement was interpreted as a unique experience of the participant that contributed to the overall experience of the shared phenomenon. I added marginal notes to highlight significant statements, thoughts, and emotions that were relevant to the experience. After each statement was thoroughly reviewed, I removed repetitive, vague, or irrelevant data for further analysis. Next, significant statements were copied into an Excel spreadsheet to continue the data analysis. As each statement was examined, categories were assigned based on the overall meaning of the statement. Next, the data analysis involved the clustering of core categories and the development of themes. I clustered 15 categories into three themes after combining repetitive categories and similar themes, which allowed the themes to represent the essence of the overall experience of the participants. The 15 categories and three themes are provided in Appendix C.

The themes developed from the data are provided in Table 2, and are reviewed later in this chapter by using quotations to support each theme. During the data analysis process, I determined that no discrepant cases were found in the data that deviate from the phenomenon under study.

Table 2

Themes by Participant

Themes	Participants who identified themes
Situation modification coping	P1 – P8
Emotion-focused coping	P1 – P8
Minority stress	P1 – P8

Textural Description

Based on developed themes and interview statements, textural descriptions were created by describing *what* each participant experienced. Textural descriptions provide insight to the context of the participant's experience in addition to their perceptions of their own experience (Moustakas, 1994). Verbatim examples from the transcribed interviews were used in this data analysis step.

Structural Description

I reviewed the textural descriptions described by the participants and developed a structural description of *how* the experience or phenomenon was experienced (Moustakas, 1994). In other words, the structural description provides an explanation of how the experience occurred in the textural description of the participant. The structural description provides great insight into the research phenomenon, as it contains the deeper meanings for the participant.

Composite Description (Essence)

Lastly, a composite description or essence statement was developed which includes the textural and structural descriptions, thereby providing the essence of the experience and informs the reader *what* the participants experienced and *how* they experienced it. By examining the *how* and *what* of the experience, I explored the deeper

meanings of the participants. Each theme received support from the participants' responses, which served as confirmation that saturation was obtained. The commonalities shared by all participants revealed the beliefs and experiences of the participants. The composite description highlights what it is like to live as a gay man who plays amateur sports, and such men's use of coping skills. Furthermore, the composite description provided answers to the following research question: How do gay men in amateur sports utilize coping skills? The composite description or essence will be provided in Chapter 5.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility.

Ensuring credibility is one of the most important factors in establishing trustworthiness. Credibility involves how believable or credible are the research findings from the perspective of the participant (Tobin & Begley, 2004). The purpose of phenomenological research is to understand the lived experience or phenomenon of the participant, so the participants can justifiably judge the credibility of the research findings. Therefore, member checking is a process in which participants were asked to verify data and its resulting interpretations. Each participant received a copy of their interview transcript by email for verification. All data was verified through this process of member checking.

Credibility was also enhanced by means of peer debriefing, which includes the analysis of data labels by an external colleague or expert (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). In my study, I engaged the assistance of a fellow graduate student at

Walden University who is educated in qualitative research. Copies of the original transcripts and resulting interpretations were sent to the peer for validation. After the peer debriefing, the peer has agreed with the data labels and the logical paths taken to arrive at these conclusions.

Transferability.

Verification of findings is obtained by providing a rich, thick description. A thick description improves the transferability of the analysis, thereby allowing the reader to transfer information from this research setting to other settings based on shared characteristics of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The primary aim of my study was to understand the phenomenon of gay men who participate in amateur sports. Thus, phenomenology is dependent on a thick description of research data to improve its transferability. According to Creswell (2009), detailed descriptions can transport the reader to the setting and add deeper meaning into the element of lived experiences. In my study, transferability was addressed by using a thick description of the participant experiences, producing information-rich themes regarding gay men who participate in amateur sports in relation to their use of coping skills.

Dependability.

Dependability is a statement of how reliable the researcher's data is (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Thus, dependability was achieved through a process of auditing and providing a reliable audit trail (Tobin & Begley, 2004). I have provided detailed information regarding documentation of data, data collection and analysis, and how themes were developed.

Confirmability.

Confirmability seeks to establish that data and research interpretations are not the result of the researcher's imagination but are directly related to the research data (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Therefore, I provided a comprehensive picture by supplying verbatim transcripts and direct quotes from the participants next to psychological expressions; all components that comprise my audit trail. Confirmability was enhanced by means of thorough record keeping and preservation of data.

Results

In a phenomenological study, the researcher focuses on what the participant experiences and seeks to describe and clarify the meanings of these experiences (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). In the current study, I gained an understanding of what the participants experienced and how their experiences were developed. Therefore, themes emerged from the collected data that aligned with the following research question: How do gay men in amateur sports utilize coping skills? The three emerging themes included situation modification coping, emotion-focused coping, and minority stress (see Table 2). Transcript quotes from the individual interviews provide support to exemplify the emerging themes, as demonstrated in the following section.

Theme 1: Situation modification coping.

Situation modification occurs when individuals seek to actively change a situation (McDavitt et al., 2008). These coping strategies were typically employed when heterosexist situations were unavoidable, such as at sporting events, the locker room, or interacting with teammates, yet the personal effect of heterosexism could be managed.

Strategies included efforts to minimize the obviousness of one's sexual orientation, such as masking or covering one's sexual orientation, keeping a low profile in a heterosexist environment, and avoiding the topic of sexual orientation (McDavitt et al., 2008). All eight participants expressed discomfort at one time or another with situations related to their sexual orientation in the sporting context. There was a conscientious effort to minimize the obviousness of their sexual orientation by actions that sought to manage stress and anxiety, either by avoiding specific topics of conversation or behavior that would bring attention to their orientation.

The covering of one's sexual orientation or keeping a low profile in a heterosexist environment were common responses to potentially stressful situations amongst all participants. The following excerpts from participant responses demonstrate how behavior was modified when asked if they conscientiously altered their behavior so as not to appear gay in front of their teammates:

P1: I think what I talked about. Like when maybe people talk about certain stories that they might have, like sexual stories or dates and stuff. Just when they want to talk about it. I really don't do that because it's just, for lack of a better word, it's just gross to them. They don't necessarily care to hear about that.

P1: Regarding the subjects that I talked about.

P2: I would monitor my intonation and inflection to make sure that I sounded masculine. I would try to mimic the toughest most masculine guy on the team, like the alpha male. I would try to mimic him and become

friends with him. I would hit on girls, relentlessly. I would talk a lot about sexual interactions with women and about their bodies and stuff like that, just really overkill, really try to overdo it. I would flirt, flirt, flirt, kiss, try to make out, things like that.

P2: If you displayed behavior that was considered suspicious or gay, you were immediately made fun of. And I was guilty of doing it to others. Gay or not, if I saw the behavior, I would jump on it to deflect from myself.

P3: Somewhat. Just because if I don't know them, I'm very guarded, just meeting somebody new. But in my gay league, I'm not, just with the straight people that know.

P4: I would really just try to act tough. And, a lot of times, I really don't like that. I would just try to be like that. When a guy would challenge me because I was really strong and fit, I would just take him down.

P4: (in reference to "take him down") You know how it's joking with friendships? So, I can beat you up or whatever. I was like, well okay, let's go for it, just attack him, just to show him. And that was almost like a sign of, like look I'm not effeminate and I'm not somebody that you can mess around with.

P5: I would wear baggier clothing, so instead of wearing a small I would wear a medium. Because everyone else in my class was dressed the same way.

P5: I drove a truck on purpose and I had a CB radio just like my other classmates so that we can talk on the CB radio.

P5: I would just agree to fit in with the group, if it was religious or they were talking about girls anything that came up, I just blended in, camouflage by agreeing with whatever the topic was. I would never share my own thoughts.

P6: I feel like, even if I ... I had a hard time not being authentic, so I don't know if necessarily changed my behavior as much as just editing it, being as outgoing as I naturally would be. I guess being more introverted.

P6: I don't think I really bonded as much.

P7: It's either if I am first getting to know them, one. And two, I haven't gauged my own level of safety that I spoke about before. If I'm not sure, whether or not it's safe for me to do so.

P7: I get more conscious about my voice and gestures, and try not to stare at people.

P8: I play soccer too actually, I go after the ball and I kicked people in the leg to get aggressive. For me, being gay has actually pushed me hard.

When participants were asked how they coped as gay men who play sports in a heteronormative culture, some answered that they changed their behavior to manage the discomfort. The following responses demonstrate these behaviors:

P1: I feel like at times I feel I cannot be myself. I feel like I'm pre-judged.

But because I have done it for a long time, I know how I need to act and how I need to be, and present myself around people.

P2: I was very paranoid. You kind of had to over-exaggerate and postulate that you were straighter than most. So you had to act more masculine, you had to be more offended by what some people considered doing things quote unquote faggy or homosexual. You had to take more offense to it because you didn't want to be singled out as being gay or shunned or made fun of.

P4: Taking showers. I'm serious, because I was afraid I might pop a boner and they would be like, 'oh my God! What a Homo'. I was super stressed about getting naked in front of, because I was so excited (laughter).

P5: I would wear baggier clothing, so instead of wearing a small I would wear a medium. Because everyone else in my class was dressed the same way.

P6: I was just pretending to fit in the culture that was already existing. I was focusing on the sport and the other aspects of socializing.

P7: Definitely less sexual talk then with my gay friends. I think, I can tell sometimes that I code switch, meaning amongst other gay people I'm like "hey girl", this and that, and different affect of my voice, versus with straight guys, sometimes I do it consciously, other times unconsciously, make my voice a little bit lower or I'm less enthusiastic, vocal.

Situational modification includes avoiding the topic of sexual orientation. When participants were asked why their sexual orientation was not disclosed to their teammates, many stated that they altered their behavior or avoided the topic, such in the following responses:

P2: If someone were to ask me, I would have told them but I didn't advertise it.

P3: Due to work related, I didn't want to disclose it because I'm a supervisor and I don't want that to affect any judgment or rumors or gossip in the office.

P3: I have no problem telling them if they asked me. But I'm not going to disclose it.

P5: Nobody that I knew of was openly gay in high school. And I graduated in a class of 53, so it was a very small town.

P5: So, in high school, because homophobia that I heard, through the small town mentality. Even my parents have made homophobic slurs.

P6: I didn't come out until I was in college. So, in college with intramural volleyball, I was already out of the closet by that time. Back in high school with sports, I was not.

P7: We traveled to a tournament and we were all cheap, so we had, like smashed six people into a room. I was out to only one person on the team because he was also gay but not to anyone else. And at that point I did not tell them because I didn't know if people refuse to share a bed with me,

because we had packed people into our hotel room. So, yeah, that was one time where I intentionally held back because I didn't know how they would react.

P7: I don't know if I felt that uncomfortable, it was just a topic that I avoided.

Theme 2: Emotion-focused coping.

Emotion-focused coping involves the purposeful regulation of distress, and may be the only viable option when the source of stress or stressor is beyond the individual's control (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Nicholls & Polman, 2008). Emotion-focused coping includes responses that focus on managing one's emotional responses to stressful events, such as emotional disclosure, seeking social support, positive self-talk, positive reinterpretation of stressful events, changing negative thoughts, exercise, acceptance, and avoidance (Chesney et al., 2006; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Amongst several participants, emotional disclosure of their sexual orientation produced a measure of relief. The following responses obtained during the individual interviews demonstrate how emotional disclosure produced positive results:

P1: Since I came out I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. I am a lot more comfortable, I feel a lot better about things. I can focus more on the sport. I can focus more myself, my body and things that I need to focus on.

P2: I was still hoping that it was just a phase, I was praying to God and working hard not to be gay.

P5: I would say that I'm more comfortable because I was true to myself.

P5: Relieved. A sense of family because they were accepting.

P6: I think empowered, like a weight was lifted off my shoulders.

P8: It's good. I think I feel a lot less stress and more free I would say. I don't have to hide anymore.

Another aspect of emotion-focused coping is seeking social support by obtaining understanding, sympathy, or moral support (Carver et al., 1989). Several participants expressed seeking out friends or relatives with whom they could consult or receive emotional support.

P1: I would talk to friends about it. And kind of get their opinion on things before I came out.

P1: I think my experiences have been pretty good. There have been negative experience where making fun takes place but I hold my own very well. I have a strong group of friends and teammates that have my back as well.

P2: I found it therapeutic to open up to relatives, not immediate family, it was very therapeutic.

P2: If they have a close friend or a confidant or a true bonded friendship with somebody on the team, have the courage to come out.

P4: If they confronted my sexuality, I would talk to my friends about it so I can release that level of stress, this was during high school.

P4: Just connect with other guys who were in the same boat as you are and connect with other athletes who are gay. Or a gay network or something, any type of sport where you can have a positive influence toward you

P5: My emotions prior, I would think anxious I would have to say that I think the way that I was able to cope that I met one person that I liked or that I trusted on the team, and when I became comfortable with that one person that's when I shared it with the rest of the team.

P5: My coworkers and I went out after work one time and that was when I was able to share that I was attracted to men. That was a positive experience and that helped me with my parents when I came out that following October.

P5: I have that fear because of the way that I was raised ... surrounding myself with other people (in the workplace) that typically have homosexuals, I think that helped me cope with the likelihood of them understanding the homosexual like myself.

When P7 was asked how he coped as a gay man in a heteronormative culture, his reply demonstrated how seeking both gay and straight teams provided a social support system:

P7: I've been involved in NAGVA, which is North American Gay Volleyball Association for quite a number of years. I actually found it when I was in Colorado right before I moved to California in 2005. And some folks from there - I played in a tournament randomly - and some

people from there recommended it to me, so I joined that when I first came to California. I didn't know anyone, so was primarily for socializing meeting new people out here.

P7: For the most part, volleyball particularly in this area in Southern California, there is a good number of gay and lesbian and trans individuals that play, so most of the open gyms around here, you get a mix of everybody.

Emotion-focused also includes exercise to manage stress (Chesney et al., 2006).

Several participants expressed how excelling in one's sport was a response to stressful events related to their orientation. For some, emotional disclosure paved the way for improved performance. The following responses demonstrate these points:

P1: Since I came out I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. I am a lot more comfortable, I feel a lot better about things. I can focus more on the sport. I can focus more myself, my body and things that I need to focus on.

P5: I would have to say that I cope by excelling in the sport. I would work to prove to all that I was as good as they were

P6: The other males that I was in sports with weren't always very kind and my response was always to work harder at what I was doing. And typically, I was almost a better athlete than everyone, I was able to train my body by outperforming them and they couldn't really like keep up.

P8: Running for me was a good way, for releasing stress and I did it because of that reason.

P8: For me, being gay has actually pushed me hard.

Emotional-focused coping includes intentional behavior to avoid or to distance oneself from the stressful event (Nicholls & Polman, 2008), such as intentionally avoiding stressful situations, awkward conversations and feelings, and staying under the radar, so to speak. Several participants reported intentionally avoiding conversation, situations, or anything that could potentially place them in uncomfortable situations:

P1: On my volleyball team, there were a lot of gay athletes and there tended to be more drama. And I'm not saying that all gay guys come with drama, but because that was personally my experience with it, I ended up quitting my senior year because I just not just handle it. I do not do well with conflict.

P2: I was not out of the closet myself I was still hoping that it was just a phase, I was praying to God and working hard not to be gay. So, I wouldn't ever think of ever disclosing it.

P2: And I was accused of staring, and there was a lot of homosexual and gay shame, so you would get bashed if you were staring at somebody's private areas. It just brought shame, I didn't quit the sport but it caused me to be in denial. I said 'I didn't stare, you were staring'. I kept going to the sport I didn't avoid the situation. But I just ignored the problem.

P4: (regarding attraction to a fellow teammate) I would try to avoid him or hide from him, where they would pull a team. You know like scrimmage

matches together. Because he would always zero in on me. I think this happens more than you realize.

P4: I wouldn't come out, but I wouldn't hide who I am so and if someone asked me if I'm gay, I would say "yeah". But I wouldn't go "I'm gay".

P4: (in the locker room) Taking showers were a big deal for me, I remember that I avoided it a lot if I could. If I couldn't, then I would just bite the bullet and go through but I would avoid getting naked with the other guys.

P5: Nobody that I knew of was openly gay in high school. And I graduated in a class of 53, so it was a very small town.

P5: (in reference to staying under the radar) So, for example, volleyball could be men or women, gay or lesbian but you would never know because you're playing on the team. So you're not singled out.

P5: You're not considered normal according to the masses. For example, if everyone else is straight and you're the gay one, you don't want to be singled out. And I think my perception is that I would think that I'm weaker because of that.

P5: I do remember a teammate asking me if I was gay and I denied it.

P6: Well, I mean, growing up I was in the closet, so I was living as a gay man in sports, I was just pretending to fit in the culture that was already existing. I was focusing on the sport and the other aspects of socializing.

P6: I don't know if necessarily changed my behavior as much as just editing it, being as outgoing as I naturally would be. I guess being more introverted.

P6: I would just rather just ignore the problem and not make something up that was not real.

P7: (in reference to self-disclosure) So, yeah, that was one time where I intentionally held back because I didn't know how they would react.

P7: It's either if I am first getting to know them, one. And two, I haven't gauged my own level of safety that I spoke about before. If I'm not sure, whether or not it's safe for me to do so.

Theme 3: Minority stress.

According to Meyer (2013), sexual minorities are subjected to excessive stress as a result of social stigmatization. The theory suggests that minority stress results from several stressors, including internalized homophobia, perceived stigma, and prejudiced events (Meyer, 2013). All participants reported experiencing stress related to their sexual orientation in sporting environments. Internalized homophobia involves the negative attitudes that society demonstrates towards homosexuality and then directing these negative feelings onto oneself (Meyer, 2013). Perceived stigma is the perception of negative attitudes about homosexuality that gay individuals sense, and the expectation of prejudice and discrimination (Meyer, 2013). Sexual minorities manage prejudice by means of coping skills and resilience, whether adaptive or maladaptive (McDavit et al., 2008; Mink et al., 2014; Sornberger, 2013). Individuals who encounter sexual stigma or

prejudice may decide to cover or hide their sexual identity as a coping mechanism, yet this becomes a heavy burden to carry, resulting in internal stress (McDavit et al., 2008).

During the individual interviews, many participants expressed discomfort at one time or another with situations, such as the locker room, traveling with teammates, or meeting new teammates, that caused stress or anxiety related to their sexual orientation, as shown from the following responses:

P1: I would say that probably who you are going to be put in the hotel room with has been challenging at times. Sometimes, I have a fear of being put in a hotel room with certain people. But not that anything is going to happen, I just don't like being around people if they're uncomfortable. So when they're uncomfortable it makes me uncomfortable.

P2: As soon as someone suspected, it was called out and you were immediately made fun of. So, if you displayed behavior that was considered suspicious or gay, you were immediately made fun of.

P2: I remember getting caught in the locker room ... and I was accused of staring at, and there was a lot of homosexual and gay shame, so you would get bashed if you were staring at somebody's private areas. It just brought shame.

P4: I was playing basketball freshman there was this guy was a senior ... and he always looked at me. He was drop dead hot. And he caught me staring at him, whatever. We went to a scrimmage ... he would always

pick me and I was like scared because I didn't know if he knew anything about me being gay. It was all secrecy ... And it caused me great stress when the guy did that when he touched me, although I really liked it

P4: That was an uncomfortable one. I didn't know other people saw that and I would, like, is he doing it to tease me?

P4: Taking showers. I'm serious, because I was afraid I might pop a boner and they would be like, 'oh my God! What a Homo'. I was super stressed about getting naked in front of, because I was so excited (laughter).

P5: I do remember a teammate asking me if I was gay and I denied it. And then he was like, okay, that's fine I was just checking. It was fine after that but after like a week or so he started to treat me differently. Like, for wrestling, we used to wrestle for practice all the time and then we had stopped practicing together. I guess he didn't want to catch it (laughter).

P5: I was in high school and I remember after practice I would not shower at the school I would only shower at home. Because I have the fear of displaying an erection in front of other men. So after practice I would just go home I would not shower at the locker room I would just go home and shower.

P6: I mean the locker room talk. Well, especially when you're young your fear is about other male bodies, so when you go into a room where they are stripping down, you kind of have to in order to not make them feel

uncomfortable, you kind of overcompensate by always looking away, being a little bit more closed off.

P6: I had a hard time not being authentic, so I don't know if necessarily changed my behavior as much as just editing it, being as outgoing as I naturally would be. I guess being more introverted.

P6: (regarding treatment from heterosexual teammates): With aggression, like, they were aggressive to me. With a lot of teasing, just teasing in general.

P7: I know I've seen it with friends where they would be taunted, again for volleyball, so a group of straight guys would either taunt them or make some comments.

P7: The most challenging aspect is, and this I have experienced if I go to a new environment with largely people I don't know, so whether that is a tournament or an open gym, I have to question my level of safety. Well, physical harm. And again, when I first came out, I was in Colorado, I was living in the town where Matthew Shepard died and that only happened a few years before. I have friends that have been beaten up at bars because they were gay. So, that was the reality that I grew up with. So, that's always kind of in the back of my mind.

P7: It's either if I am first getting to know them, one. And two, I haven't gauged my own level of safety that I spoke about before. If I'm not sure, whether or not it's safe for me to do so.

Prior to disclosing their sexual orientation, several participants expressed negative feelings, such as stress, depression, shame, paranoia, and anxiety, as shown from the following responses:

P2: I was very paranoid.

P2: Shame. Embarrassment, worry. Scared that I would lose them as friends. Worry that they would feel, that they would tow the conservative line.

P2: And that you're not only training very hard for the sport but on top of that you are giving yourself emotional and psychological stress and strain because it's another layer that you have to think about and be cognizant of, on top of the training.

P3: My emotions prior to my teammates knowing my sexuality was fear and some stress.

P4: It was a lot of pressure. I felt really uncomfortable, and I was very unhappy about it.

P5: So, my emotions prior, I would think anxious.

P6: Depressed. I was depressed.

P8: I wasn't too comfortable, and I wasn't all that happy about it.

After disclosing their sexual orientation, P1 and P8 expressed a feeling of relief and less stress:

P1: Since I came out I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. I am a lot more comfortable, I feel a lot better about things. I can focus

more on the sport. I can focus more myself, my body and things that I need to focus on.

P8: It's good. I think I feel a lot less stress and more free I would say. I don't have to hide anymore.

Even when participants had already disclosed their sexual orientation, some expressed discomfort about others discovering that they were gay, as shown from the following responses:

P1: But when I'm with people I make it a goal for them not to find out. And I think a big part of that is because I'm not super comfortable with myself yet.

P3: Due to work related, I didn't want to disclose it because I'm a supervisor and I don't want that to affect any judgment or rumors or gossip in the office.

P4: And you're not sure how the guys react. Some guys might say they're okay with it, but they might have a little bit of animosity or something against you.

Participants also expressed a fear of judgment related to their sexual orientation, which also aligns with perceived stigma, as shown from these examples:

P1: I think that judgment has already has been a big fear of mine. I personally have always wanted people to like me. And I think a lot of guys look at you differently if you were not straight.

P1: I feel like at times I feel I cannot be myself. I feel like I'm pre-judged.

P2: There would be situations where you know that your audience is less exposed, more rural, more uneducated, people who would not have exposure to out homosexuals, people who are deeply religious. That's a situation where I would feel uncomfortable disclosing it, for fear of conflict, the immediate judgment.

P3: Some of my teammates are coworkers and they do not need to know about my sexuality. My emotions prior to my teammates knowing my sexuality was fear and some stress.

P4: I didn't know if he knew anything about me being gay. It was all secrecy ... And it caused me great stress.

Perceived stigma of sexual prejudice or discrimination, even if not actually experienced, can cause stress and anxiety as shown from the following responses:

P1: (Regarding fellow teammates), I think I'm more weird about it than them.

P2: The person who is making the shame, the guilt, and the worry and the stress is mostly from them (the gay individual).

P3: I have no problem telling them if they asked me. But I'm not going to disclose it. Some of my teammates are coworkers and they do not need to know about my sexuality.

P3: I am more guarded. Just because if I don't know them I'm very guarded, just meeting somebody new.

P4: And you're not sure how the guys react. Some guys might say they're okay with it, but they might have a little bit of animosity or something against you.

P5: You're not considered normal according to the masses. For example, if everyone else is straight and you're the gay one, you don't want to be singled out. And I think my perception is that I would think that I'm weaker because of that.

P7: The most challenging aspect is, and this I have experienced if I go to a new environment with largely people I don't know, so whether that is a tournament or an open gym, I have to question my level of safety.

P8: I would avoid it a couple of friends in high school that I found attractive just because I don't want to ruin anything and I always think too much. But looking back, I think most people would have been okay and I would have been a lot happier in high school.

During the data analysis process, I determined that no discrepant cases were found in the data that deviate from the phenomenon under study.

Summary of Chapter 4

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of gay men who play amateur sports and to document their use of coping skills. The interview responses revealed patterns of meaning across all participants. Participant responses were summarized in detail relating to three significant themes: 1) situation modification coping, 2) emotion-focused coping, and 3) minority stress. The Modified

Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method was used to perform a thorough data analysis (Moustakas, 1994), including bracketing my own experience, horizontalization of the data, capturing significant statements, constructing textural and structural descriptions of the experience, and developing a composite description to include the *what* and *how* of the overall experience of participants.

Chapter 5 provides an interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, essence of the study, and social change implications.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the experience of gay men in amateur sports and identify their coping skills, whether adaptive or maladaptive, utilized in sports environments. The phenomenological method is focused on what the participant experiences, and it seeks to describe and clarify the meanings of these lived experiences. The implications for positive social change include a better understanding of gay men's experience in amateur sports and the potential to identify positive coping strategies.

The following research question was used in this phenomenological study and provided the foundation for the in-depth interview questions:

How do gay men in amateur sports utilize coping skills?

Chapter 4 revealed patterns of meaning across all participants, resulting in three significant themes: (a) situation modification coping, (b) emotion-focused coping, and (c) minority stress. Situation modification coping occurs when individuals seek to actively change a situation, specifically in situations when heterosexism is unavoidable (McDavitt et al., 2008). Strategies included efforts to minimize the obviousness of one's sexual orientation, keeping a low profile in a heterosexist environment, and avoiding the topic of sexual orientation (McDavitt et al., 2008). Emotion-focused coping involves the purposeful regulation of distress and may be the only viable option when the source of stress or stressor is beyond the individual's control (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Nicholls & Polman, 2008). Emotion-focused coping includes emotional disclosure, seeking social

support, positive self-talk, positive reinterpretation of stressful events, changing negative thoughts, exercise, acceptance, and avoidance (Chesney et al., 2006; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). According to Meyer (2013), sexual minorities are subjected to excessive stress as a result of social stigmatization. All participants reported experiencing stress related to their sexual orientation in sports environments. This chapter provides the interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, social change implications, and the essence of the study.

Interpretation of the Findings

This section includes an interpretation of the findings on the topic of coping skills of gay men within the context of sports environments, including their experiences of sexual minority stress. The interpretations are presented according to the research question and from within the context of peer-reviewed literature discussed in Chapter 2. Existing literature was reviewed related to sexual prejudice within sport, heterosexism within sport, coping skills and sexual orientation, and the minority stress theory. Research has shown that prejudice toward gay men still exists to some degree in sport and that sexual minorities encounter greater stress compared to heterosexuals (Hill & Gunderson, 2015; Sattler et al., 2016). What is not known, however, is how gay men utilize coping strategies in the world of amateur sport. Therefore, this research seeks to address the gap in the body of existing literature and to consider previous research related to the following three themes:

Theme 1: Situation modification coping.

All participants interviewed in this study described coping strategies that aligned with situation modification coping. Situation modification occurs when individuals attempt to actively alter a situation, particularly when heterosexism is unavoidable but the personal impact of heterosexism could be changed or managed (McDavitt et al., 2008). All participants described situations in which their behavior was changed or modified to minimize the obviousness of their sexual orientation. In these situations, heterosexism was unavoidable, but the personal impact of heterosexism could be managed. For example, participants were involved in situations that required their attendance or participation related to sports, such as traveling with teammates, practicing and competing in sport, or changing and showering in the locker room. Consequently, the source of stress in these situations could not be changed, such as heterosexist dialog and behavior that often accompanies these situations; however, participants sought ways to cope with this stress by changing its personal impact (McDavitt et al., 2008).

According to peer-reviewed literature, coping skills may be grouped into various categories. For example, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) described coping mechanisms that aligned with problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping, whereas researchers in subsequent studies expanded the categories to include avoidance and disengagement coping (Compas, 2006; Nicholls & Polman, 2008). McDavitt et al. (2008) described how situation modification includes behavior that seeks to mask or cover one's orientation, such as avoiding the topic of sexual orientation, keeping a low profile in a heterosexist setting, or hiding the obviousness of one's sexual orientation, which was reflected in the

responses from the participants. For example, several participants expressed discomfort in the locker room and showering with teammates. P6 reported having to overcompensate his behavior by always looking the other direction and by acting more emotionally unavailable so as not to bring undue attention to himself in this setting. P4 recounted intentionally avoiding showers with teammates due to the awkwardness of being nude around other men.

Amongst many participants, hiding the obviousness of their sexual orientation was common behavior. For example, P2 described how he would intentionally monitor his intonation and inflection to sound more masculine, in addition to mimicking the most masculine guy on the team to avoid any suspicion of his sexual orientation. P3 reported acting very guarded in situations in which homophobic responses was expected. P4 described intentionally behaving tough and aggressive so as not to appear effeminate. P1 expressed knowing how to behave to present himself around others. These are a few examples presented in Chapter 4 that provide numerous verbatim expressions of participants in which behavior or dialog was intentionally altered to manage the personal impact of stressful situations.

Gough (2007) described the challenges encountered by gay men in sports. The author examined eight qualitative experiences of gay athletes and their coming out experiences. Several athletes reported depression, stress, and worry as they described their coming out experience to fellow teammates, in addition to experiencing an uncomfortable culture that promoted heteronormative dialog and behavior (Gough, 2007). Likewise, the participants in my study described similar emotions that confirmed

the findings presented in the literature review. For example, P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, and P8 all reported feelings of paranoia, shame, embarrassment, worry, fear, stress, worry, discomfort, unhappiness, anxiety, and depression related to their sexual orientation in the sports context.

The participants' perception of a negative environment based on previous experiences confirmed the existing studies on perceived stigma (Cavalier, 2011; Cramer et al., 2013; Herek et al., 2009). Cavalier (2011) studied the experiences of 10 gay men employed in professional, collegiate, and club sports, nine of whom were previous athletes. Cavalier found that the participants' perceptions of a negative environment were largely based on their prior experience as athletes and employees rather than an actual experience of hostility. Perceived discrimination is the perception of negative attitudes about homosexuality that gay individuals sense, and the expectation of prejudice and discrimination (Cavalier, 2011). Likewise, the participants in my study did not report physical violence, yet did experience some level of heterosexist stigma and perceived stigma, and they employed coping strategies to manage the personal impact of heterosexism.

As confirmed in Cavalier's (2011) study, the presence of fear served as a motivation for self-protection, as many participants in this study were not willing to disclose their sexuality or often monitored the situation for safety prior to disclosure. For example, P7 reported evaluating a new sports setting prior to disclosure. Although P7 has not personally been a victim of physical violence, he has experienced the negative impact of violence on others, such as living in the same small town where Matthew

Shephard was brutally murdered for being gay, in addition to knowing personal friends who have been physically beaten for being gay. Hence, P7 described feelings of fear and the need to gauge a situation for personal safety prior to disclosure of his orientation. As shown from this example, situation modification coping was used to manage the personal impact of heterosexism by avoiding the topic of orientation when safety is at risk.

Theme 2: Emotion-focused coping.

In addition to situation modification coping, the participants also described behavior that involved an internal emotional state and efforts to manage or modify stress caused by circumstances (Carver et al., 1989). This behavior corroborated the findings of Carver et al. (1989) who reported that emotion-focused coping might be used when individuals sense that a stressor must be endured. Due to the love of sport, the participants in my study sought to endure the stressor, consequently pursuing other ways to manage the emotional impact of the stressor.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identified two types of coping strategies: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. As the name indicates, problem-focused coping involves active problem-solving that modifies or seeks to control the source of stress caused by external events (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Yeatts & Lochbaum, 2013). Individuals will resort to problem-solving coping when they sense that something constructive can be done to alter the source of stress, whereas emotion-focused coping may be utilized when individuals sense that the stressor must be endured (Carver et al., 1989; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980).

However, within the sports context, participants in my study are placed in situations in which the source of stress must be endured due to their voluntary participation in sporting events and training. As a result, the use of emotion-focused coping became a prominent theme for this research topic. Emotion-focused coping involves an individual's internal emotional state and efforts to modify or reduce emotional stress caused by stressful events (Carver et al., 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Carver et al., 1989; Nicholls & Polman, 2008). Sornberger (2013) described strategies that are beneficial to an individual's well-being as adaptive, and strategies that may decrease the individual's well-being as maladaptive. Emotion-focused coping may include adaptive strategies, such as seeking social support, positive reinterpretation of stressful events, exercise, emotional disclosure, and relaxation, whereas maladaptive strategies may involve denial, distancing oneself from stress, and avoidance (Carver et al., 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Carver et al., 1989; Nicholls & Polman, 2008).

Amongst several participants, emotional disclosure of their sexual orientation and seeking out social support in times of stress produced positive emotions, such as relief, courage, and increased comfort with self. For example, several participants sought out friends, relatives, teammates, other gay athletes or coworkers, and psychotherapy for emotional support. This behavior supported the findings of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), who claimed that coping is not an automated act, but a conscious behavior which is used when an individual determines that a stressful event is challenging or surpassing their resources.

According to several participants in my study, emotional-disclosure provided positive outcomes. Some compared their disclosure to a weight lifted being off their shoulders, and having experienced positive results, such as increased ability to focus on the sport, increased comfort with self, empowerment, relief, and decreased stress.

Emotion-focused coping may also involve avoidant behavior, in which individuals intentionally avoid the stressor, which may appear to be a meaningful way of coping with certain stressors in the short-term but in the long-term may be maladaptive (Seiffge-Krenke, 2004). The avoidant behavior reported by several participants validated the findings in the literature review. Sornberger (2013) described how concealing one's sexual orientation, including avoidance, may contribute to a negative perception of self and increased self-monitoring. For example, several participants in my study reported intentionally avoiding uncomfortable situations, such as taking showers with fellow teammates or associating with men whom they found to be attractive. Others purposely denied being gay or feigned being heterosexual by means of heteronormative dialog and behavior.

Theme 3: Minority stress.

According to the minority stress theory, individuals who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual encounter greater levels of stress compared to heterosexuals (Meyer, 2013). The theory suggests that minority stress results from several stressors, including internalized homophobia, perceived stigma, and prejudiced events (Meyer, 2013). Internalized homophobia involves directing the negative attitudes that society demonstrates towards homosexuality toward oneself. Sport has mandated gender-

appropriate behaviors, so that male dominance and power are preserved, thereby promoting prejudice and discrimination (Cunningham, & Melton, 2012; Cunningham & Sagas, 2008). All participants in my study reported having experienced stress and anxiety related to their sexual orientation in sports environments and then engaging various coping strategies to manage minority stress.

Sexual minorities manage discrimination using coping skills and resilience; group solidarity provides a channel of support, thereby protecting minorities from the negative effects of minority stress (McDavit et al., 2008; Mink et al., 2014; Sattler et al., 2016; Sornberger, 2013). The emotional and psychological experiences of the participants in my study confirmed the findings of existing peer-reviewed literature. For example, Sattler et al. (2016) conducted a survey of 1,118 gay men to investigate how minority stress predicted mental health problems. The survey's findings indicated that gay and bisexual men experience significantly higher rates of depression and anxiety disorders compared to heterosexual men. Even if gay men can successfully disguise their sexual identity, they may still perceive an imagined perspective of how another individual feels about homosexuality (Meyer, 2013).

Similarly, participants in my study indicated perceived stigma about how others might feel about their sexual identity even when no overt discrimination was demonstrated. Due to previous experiences of discrimination, however, many participants held on to these memories, which influenced their interactions with others. This behavior is likely due to the experience of minority stress in which perceived social norms contrast with the lived experiences of these participants who identify as a sexual

minority. As a result, this perceived stigma produced increased feelings of stress, anxiety, and fear. Hill and Gunderson (2015) described how this type of minority stress results from long-lasting exposure to direct and indirect types of discrimination and prejudice. Sornberger (2013) described how sexual minorities may have internal conflicts, and may also be subjected to victimization and discrimination from others. Consequently, sexual minority individuals have reported using maladaptive coping strategies more often than heterosexuals (Sornberger, 2013).

Moreover, as described in existing literature and validated in the present study, minority stress results from encountering societal expectations and values that differ from the emotional and psychological needs of the sexual minority (Hill & Gunderson, 2015; Meyer, 2013; Sornberger, 2013). All participants in my study reported feeling of stress and anxiety related to their sexual orientation in sports environments. For example, P1 reported feeling prejudged by others and that he cannot be himself, although he admitted that his fears might not always be warranted. Psychological stress and strain was described by P2 related to others discovering his orientation and reported fear of immediate judgement. The overall experience of P3 was described as stressful with regards to his teammates discovering his orientation, yet he expressed experiencing relief once his orientation was disclosed. P4 reported feeling scared and having experienced great stress about others knowing that he was gay. P5 described his discomfort and stress when traveling with teammates due to the nature of heteronormative dialog, and did not want to be singled out as being different. P6 admitted to intentionally altering his behavior and becoming more introverted so as not to appear gay in front of teammates.

P7 described always having to monitor new sports environments prior to disclosure of his orientation to gauge his personal level of safety. Lastly, P8 reported having nightmares and having experienced great stress directly related to hiding his orientation from others.

As shown by the experiences of these participants, not all coping strategies are beneficial to an individual's well-being, such as avoidance and denial. Participants in my study employed a variety of coping strategies to manage minority stress. Situation modification coping was used when the source of heterosexist stress was unavoidable, whereas emotion-focused coping was used by some respondents to manage their emotional state. Sornberger (2013) described strategies that are beneficial to an individual's well-being as adaptive, and strategies that may decrease the individual's well-being as maladaptive.

Conceptual Framework

The results of my study validated the conceptual framework for this phenomenological study and provided clarity to the research question. My study was framed according to Meyer's (2013) minority stress theory. Specifically, this theory suggests that sexual minorities are subjected to excessive stress due to social stigmatization, internalized homophobia, and experience of prejudice. Meyer (2013) developed the theory based on stress literature, psychological theory, and mental health research within the lesbian, gay, bisexual population. In sports environments, heterosexism and hegemonic masculinity are reinforced, thereby affecting expected behaviors (Cunningham & Sagas, 2008).

Existing literature demonstrates that sexual minorities are at increased risk of mental health issues, such as depression, substance abuse, anxiety, and suicidality, compared to heterosexuals (Meyer, 2013; Mink et al., 2014; Sattler et al., 2016). The minority stress theory argues that sexual minorities encounter increased levels of stress due to negative societal attitudes and prejudice (Meyer, 2013). Previous research has shown a relationship between higher levels of depression and internalized homophobia in addition to perceived stigma among gay youth (Berghe et al., 2010).

The theory suggests that minority stress results from several stressors: internalized homophobia, perceived stigma, and prejudiced events (Meyer, 2013). Internalized homophobia is related to the negative attitudes that society demonstrates towards homosexuality that are directed by an individual onto him or herself (Lea et al., 2014; Meyer, 2013). Perceived stigma is the perception of negative attitudes about homosexuality that gay individuals sense, and the expectation of prejudice and discrimination (Lea et al., 2014; Meyer, 2013).

During my phenomenological study, it became evident that the coping strategies used by gay men in sport were influenced by perceived stigma and prejudice related to their sexual orientation. As a result, participants often modified their behavior and dialog so as not to appear gay. In this way, situation modification coping helped to manage the personal impact of stress when the source of stress could not be changed. Similarly, emotion-focused coping helped participants modify or manage their internal emotional state related to stressful events. The minority stress theory provides a framework for the

participants' experiences as it relates to their use of these various coping strategies in a heteronormative and heterosexist sports context.

Limitations of the Study

This phenomenological research provides a valuable contribution to the existing body of literature on the lived experiences of gay men who play sports and their use of coping skills. Nevertheless, it is important to document how limitations to the trustworthiness were mitigated. Due to the nature of the research topic, challenges included locating willing participants for individual interviews and individuals' reluctance to disclose sexual orientation. Anderson (2011) reported how gay athletes continue to hide their sexual identities and have rarely publically disclosed their sexuality due to stigma, prejudice, and discrimination. Although the findings are not generalizable to all gay men other than those specified in the inclusion criteria, the participants provided heartfelt and valuable data regarding their lived experiences.

To mitigate this limitation, interviews were conducted until saturation was obtained, which occurred after the final interview when no new ideas were expressed. In addition, thick description was used to describe the participants' experiences, thereby improving the transferability of the findings (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). An audit trail was used to ensure dependability of the study using verbatim transcripts, peer review notes, and direct quotes from the participants next to psychological expressions (Rudestam & Newton, 2015).

I sought to create an interview setting that facilitated open dialog. In this study, efforts were made to create an honest and genuine environment. I asked open-ended

questions to promote open communication, in addition to probing questions to gain additional insight. During the individual interviews, I was careful not to discuss any personal beliefs or assumptions. I used the interview protocol as a guide to facilitate the interview process. The assumption was that participants would answer all the interview questions openly and honestly.

Another potential limitation is that phenomenological inquiry may not provide the quantitative descriptions previous studies concerning gay athletes have found. Quantitative studies are able to specifically identify public attitudes toward gay athletes (Billings et al, 2015). The findings from my study are based on qualitative interpretation rather than quantitative analysis.

Recommendations

This study was conducted to address the gap in the literature with regards to the coping skills of gay men who play amateur sports. The findings include data obtained from eight participants identified as gay men who have played or are currently playing in sports. The ages ranged from 23 to 52 years of age of these participants, which provided valuable insights into the perceptions of their lived experiences, and how these experiences developed, particularly related to their coping skills.

The research criteria limited participation to only gay men and did not include lesbian athletes. The focus on gay male athletes is related to existing literature on masculinities and sport (Anderson, 2011; Cunningham, & Melton, 2012; Cunningham & Sagas, 2008; Gough, 2007). Hence, female athletes were not included in my research; for that reason, the results of my study may not be reflective of that specific population.

Therefore, additional research could be conducted to address the shared experience of lesbian athletes and how they cope in sports environments.

Moreover, it would be beneficial to seek additional insight into the pre-coming out versus post-coming out experiences of gay men. Several participants expressed relief and decreased stress after disclosing their sexual orientation. For example, P3 reported experiencing relief once his teammates learned of his sexual orientation, whereas he expressed fear and stress prior to disclosure. Therefore, it would be valuable to understand how self-disclosure relates to psychological well-being.

Additional research with regards to participant personality type related to coping skills could provide further insight into various coping strategies. Existing peer-reviewed literature demonstrated how personality type influences choice of coping strategy. For example, Yeatts and Lochman (2013) found that extraversion predicted problem-focused coping, while neuroticism predicted avoidance coping amongst participants actively engaged in fitness. Furthermore, Afshar et al. (2015) observed that personality traits might influence the effectiveness of coping styles, and what may be effective for one personality type may prove ineffective for another. In my study, it is worthy to note that some participants chose to avoid the topic of sexual orientation during specific social settings, whereas others freely volunteered the information. Also, some participants intentionally avoided situations that would bring attention to their sexual orientation, and others purposely feigned a masculine bravado to minimize the obviousness of their orientation.

Due to the nature of phenomenological data, there was no control for variables. Thus, a quantitative study could be conducted to evaluate how the experiences of gay athletes are measured by the variables of perceived stigma and prejudice. In particular, statistical data could provide additional insight into how coping skills developed in the sporting context. To date, research could not be located related to gay athletes and coping skills; therefore, the addition of quantitative analysis would advance the knowledge of the psychological needs of this population.

Implications

Positive social change.

The findings from this study have the potential to create positive social change in individuals, families, and communities by providing additional knowledge of the experiences of gay men who play sports and by identifying their adaptive coping strategies. These insights provide knowledge as to how stigma and prejudice negatively influence gay men who play sports. For example, participants of my study reported modifying their behavior and conversation as a result of perceived stigma from teammates and society in general. Thus, implications for positive social change include increased visibility of the emotional and psychological challenges reported by gay men.

According to several participants, self-disclosure of sexual orientation was not always an easy experience. Nevertheless, several participants expressed relief and decreased stress after disclosure, whereas many participants reported feelings of depression, anxiety, fear, and stress prior to disclosure. Therefore, the athlete who discloses their sexual orientation to their teammates might feel more empowered and

have more positive energy dedicated to sports training. These men are important community members who not only affect their families and friends, but also their teammates, coaches, and sports environments as positive change takes place. Amongst athletes, it is common to feel a strong bond with fellow teammates. For example, some participants in my study described their fellow teammates as brothers or family. My study revealed how emotional disclosure was used as an adaptive coping strategy resulting in positive outcomes, such as decreased stress and anxiety, emotional relief, and becoming closer to teammates.

Additionally, the implications for positive social change include exploring the addition of multi-cultural education for team athletes that promotes acceptance and inclusivity of sexual orientation. Athletic training educators have an opportunity to positively influence team performance and comradery by supporting educational programs that address human sexuality, thereby promoting acceptance, inclusivity, and cohesion amongst athletes regardless of sexual orientation. Moreover, these findings will provide the general public with an understanding of the challenges of gay athletes, and that sexual orientation has nothing to do with one's ability to play sport, but instead the love of sport is the primary motivation to participate. Children develop many of their values and attitudes toward society early in life. Therefore, exploring the inclusion of educational programs introduced at an early age may provide a setting for children to gain knowledge of the harmful effects of discrimination and prejudice (Lea et al., 2014), in addition to highlighting the benefits of inclusivity and acceptance, such as increased team performance and teammate comradery.

Methodological implications.

As described in Chapter 2, at the time of my study, research could not be located related to the lived experiences of gay athletes and coping skills. The Modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method used for my phenomenological study provided a complete data analysis, resulting in in-depth descriptions of the lived experiences of the eight participants (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2013). The data collection and analysis process provided rich, thick descriptions of the experiences of these gay men according to their unique perspective.

Theoretical implications.

To advance the theoretical understanding of minority stress, Meyer (2013) claimed that sexual minorities are subjected to excessive stress because of social stigmatization. Meyer based the minority stress theory on stress literature, psychological theory, and mental health research within the lesbian, gay, and bisexual population (Meyer, 2013). Qualitative data on the experiences of gay men in the sporting context combined with this theoretical framework can provide a more profound understanding of minority stress. A significant implication of my study is that situation modification coping and emotion-focused coping can add to the theoretical understanding of the psychological needs of gay men as related to the sporting context. In particular, theories can be used in quantitative research in establishing a connection between data on the variable of coping strategies and the psychological needs to gay men.

Recommendations for practice.

My study obtained valuable insight from participants into the coping skills of gay men who often struggle with their sexual identity in a heteronormative sports culture. These insights provide knowledge to teammates, family, friends, and other individuals as to how stigma, prejudice, and heterosexist dialog/behavior negatively influence gay men who play sports. Consequently, implications for positive social change include increased visibility of the emotional and psychological challenges reported by gay men. Moreover, the lived experiences provided by my study's participants can provide direction for additional research to improve the experiences of gay men in sports with an improved understanding of adaptive coping strategies exclusively from the perceptions of the participants. These findings might contribute to psychotherapy treatments tailored for gay men, by considering how gay athletes have successfully coped in their environments using adaptive coping strategies.

Conclusion

My phenomenological method of inquiry focused on what the participant experienced and sought to describe and clarify the meanings of these experiences (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). Therefore, phenomenological research was selected so that the experiences of gay men who participate in amateur sports could be further explored, and to identify the coping skills used in this context. The objective of my study was to address the gap in the literature related to gay men in sports and their use of coping skills. My study's findings corroborated existing peer-reviewed literature regarding coping strategies, including situation modification coping and emotion-focused coping (Lazarus

& Folkman, 1984; Chesney et al., 2006; McDavitt et al., 2008). Additionally, the findings were consistent with literature related to minority stress due to perceived stigma and prejudice within heterosexist environments (Lea et al., 2014; Meyer, 2013). Through in-depth individual interviews, the participants reported valuable descriptions of their lived experiences, resulting in a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of gay men who play sports in a heteronormative and heterosexist sports culture.

The love of sport is a common denominator amongst all participants, as expressed by their active participation and competition in individual and team sports from childhood into adulthood. Despite the love of sports, however, these gay men have also experienced challenges directly related to their sexual orientation in a heteronormative sports culture. Some participants specifically selected sports that enabled them to blend in with other teammates while not bringing undue attention to their sexuality. Amongst several participants, there was an intentional nondisclosure of their sexual orientation to their teammates, while others were openly gay but did not automatically volunteer this information unless directly asked.

Although direct physical harassment was not reported, participants did report discomfort at one time or another within the sports context directly related to their sexual orientation. For example, all participants reported feelings of stress, anxiety, depression, fear, paranoia, and unhappiness when others knew or suspected that they were gay. P7 even questioned his level of personal safety prior to any disclosure in new sports environments. However, several participants expressed relief after disclosure and likened

their experience to a weight being lifted off their shoulders, enabling them to continue excelling in the sport.

The participants also reported valuable information on how they coped with perceived stigma and prejudice in the sporting context. All participants used various coping strategies, both adaptive and maladaptive, to manage levels of stress and anxiety associated with their sexual orientation. For example, emotion-focused coping included adaptive strategies such as exercise, emotional disclosure, and social support, whereas maladaptive strategies included denial, avoidance, or distancing oneself from stress (Carver et al., 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Nicholls & Polman, 2008). Emotion-focused coping involves an individual's internal emotional state and efforts to manage emotional stress caused by stressful events (Carver et al., 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

In addition, participants reported the use of situation modification coping in which they intentionally altered a situation when heterosexism was unavoidable, yet the personal impact of heterosexism could be managed (McDavitt et al., 2008). For example, several participants masked their orientation by minimizing its obviousness, avoiding the topic of sexual orientation, and keeping a low profile in heterosexist environments. This type of coping was a dominant theme due to the nature of the research setting. Athletes are often in unavoidable situations related to the sporting context, such as training, competing, traveling to events, and changing or showering in the locker room. As reported by the participants, these circumstances often present scenarios involving heteronormative behavior and dialog; therefore, all participants expressed modifying their

own behavior to lessen the obviousness of their sexual orientation. Thus, participants must cope with the psychological and emotional impact caused by modifying their own behavior to fit in with their fellow teammates.

The participants' rich descriptions are consistent with Meyer's (2013) minority stress theory, which suggests that sexual minorities are subjected to excessive stress because of social stigmatization, internalized homophobia, and experience of prejudice. The minority stress associated with sexual orientation even after disclosure is an important aspect in understanding the *what* and *how* of the participants' experiences.

My study effectively accomplished its purpose by exploring the deeper meanings of the participants and by providing greater insight into the essence of the shared experience for this group of men. My study sought to understand the coping strategies of these men as related to sexual minority stress, resulting in a deeper understanding of situation modification coping and emotion-focused coping within the sporting context. It is hoped that the knowledge provided by the participants will contribute to the body of literature regarding how gay men cope within a sports culture historically known as heterosexist and homophobic (Pummer, 2006; Sartore & Cunningham, 2009; Cunningham, & Melton, 2012), in addition to advancing the understanding of the lived experiences of gay men in sports from a theoretical framework.

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Appendix A: Letter to Participant

Name of Participant
Address

Date:

Dear (Name),

My name is Jesuel Alamo and I am a doctoral candidate at Walden University. I am conducting dissertation research on the coping skills of gay men who participate in amateur sports. There are a vast number of studies detailing discrimination and prejudice of gay men in sports, in addition to the use of positive and negative coping skills by sexual minorities. What is not known, however, is how gay men in amateur sports utilize coping skills. This research will provide insight into what these men experience while participating in sports.

I realize that your time is important to you and I appreciate your consideration to participate in this study. In order to fully understand your experience, we need to meet for an interview for approximately one hour. Meetings can be held at a location of your choosing and will not require you to do anything that you do not feel comfortable doing. The meetings are designed to simply get to know you and learn about your experience of being a gay male who participates in sports. All information gathered during our meeting will be kept strictly confidential.

Please contact me at your earliest convenience to schedule a date and time that we can meet.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Jesuel Alamo
Doctoral Candidate
Walden University

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Date: _____

Location: _____

Name of Interviewer: _____

Name of Interviewee: _____

1. Whether you participate in a straight league or gay league, describe your reasons for playing in that particular league.
2. How do you cope as a gay man who plays sports in a heteronormative culture?
3. How does being gay influence the type of sport you decided to participate in?
4. If not out to your teammates, describe your reasons for not disclosing that you are gay.
5. If out to your teammates, describe your emotions prior to your teammates knowing your sexuality.
 - a. How was your sexuality disclosed to them?
6. Describe your emotions after your teammates learned of your sexuality.
7. Recall a stressful event encountered during sports participation related to your sexual orientation, and tell me how you typically react to the situation.
 - a. How do you manage that discomfort?
8. Describe the most challenging aspect of being gay in sports participation.
9. Describe circumstances in which you conscientiously altered your behavior so as not to appear gay in front of your teammates (applies to gay and straight leagues).

10. While participating in sports with heterosexual teammates who knew or suspected your sexuality, describe your experience with how you are treated by these teammates.
11. Describe your experiences when interacting with heterosexual men while playing sports.

Appendix C: Categories and Themes

Categories	Themes
Covering sexual orientation	Situation modification coping
Keeping a Low Profile in a Heterosexist Environment	
Avoiding the Topic of Sexual Orientation	
Social support system	Emotion-focused coping
Emotional disclosure	
Positive self-talk	
Positive reinterpretation of stressful events	
Changing negative thoughts	
Excelling in sport/exercise	
Acceptance	
Avoidance/distancing	Minority stress
Perceived stigma	
Pre-disclosure stress/anxiety	
Situational stress/anxiety	
Fear of judgment	