



‘I somehow had the Feeling that I did not belong there’— Experiences of Gay and Lesbian Recreational Athletes in German Sports Clubs

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Abstract

There is little empirical research on the sport experiences of gay and lesbian recreational athletes in Germany and their existence and needs within organized, non-professional sports have largely been ignored. Based on twelve in-depth interviews with self-identified male gay and female lesbian adults, this paper explores how queer recreational athletes experience sport in German sports clubs and which particular challenges or discriminatory situations they are confronted with. Findings show that study participants do not experience much discrimination on an explicit level in the sports clubs. Nevertheless, many respondents try to hide their sexuality in the sports context to prevent possible discrimination and questions about their sexuality. After all, it is mainly the discussion about and reduction of their sexuality that is being experienced as problematic. Five main stressors have been identified: (1) the necessity of an outing, (2) the sports club typical mode of communication, (3) the heteronormative pre-structuring of the sports, (4) the feeling of otherness and the assigned special role, (5) the implicit fear of discrimination. The findings point to the need for increased reflection on and reduction of heteronormative structures in German sports clubs.

Keywords Organized sports · Heteronormativity · LGBTQ+ · Gay · Lesbian

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1 Introduction

Particularly since the 1970s, sport has been an essential part of popular everyday culture in Germany, especially since leisure time was from then on no longer perceived and used only as recreational time, but also as adventure and active time (Mittag & Wendland, 2015). Nowadays, sport is one of the most popular leisure activities for young people in Germany (Leven & Schneekloth, 2015; Züchner, 2013). For many people, playing sport means joining a sports club, of which there are around 90,000 in Germany (Deutscher Olympischer Sportbund, 2017). The vast majority of sports clubs can be described as ‘traditional’ sports clubs, i.e. clubs without a specific target group. These traditional sports clubs are part of the sports culture in Germany and they can be classified as recreational sports. The counterpart to these clubs are, for example, so-called women sports clubs, migrant sports clubs or sports clubs for the disabled that name and address specific target groups. In addition, there are now over 70 so-called queer sports clubs that specifically address LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer etc.) people (Bundesnetzwerktagung der queeren Sportvereine, 2018; Böhlke & Müller, 2020).

Prior research on LGBTQ+ in general emphasize that many gender and sexually diverse individuals experience stress because of homophobia, exclusion and other forms of discrimination in different spheres of activity (Bostwick, 2014; Burgess et al., 2007). Sport does not seem to be an exception: International studies indicate that discrimination and exclusion of LGBTQ+ people in diverse sport settings is widespread (e.g. Denison et al., 2020; Menzel et al., 2019; Müller, Delto, Böhlke & Mutz, 2022; Baiocco et al., 2018; Kulick et al., 2019). Experiences of homo-negativity, homophobia and sexual discrimination can have a negative impact on the mental health of gender and sexually diverse people (Bostwick, 2014). Furthermore, recent studies suggest that LGBTQ+ youth participate in sports to a lesser extent than their heterosexual peers (Doull et al., 2018; Calzo et al., 2014). This disparity is more pronounced for sexual minority males than sexual minority females¹ (Greenspan et al., 2019). Current research on diversity in sport is primarily being conducted to better understand experiences of LGBTQ+ in different sport contexts and the unique barriers that may challenge their participation (Herrick & Duncan, 2018).

Our study offers new insights into the experiences of athletes from the queer community in Germany who have been able to move through these barriers and are now in sporting clubs and organizations. Within this paper, we focus in particular on self-identified male gay and female lesbian athletes’ experiences in traditional sports clubs. Starting point is that LGBTQ+ is an umbrella term for a heterogeneous group, and the sports experiences of lesbian and gay athletes are likely to differ from e.g. transgender individuals (see e.g. Hartmann-Tews et al., 2020; 2021). Thereby, we include both team and individual sports that are played in traditional sports clubs in Germany, such as volleyball, basketball, football, handball, tennis, table tennis etc. These sports are practiced by our study participants at a low to medium level, and most of them take place regularly and in groups within the framework of club training.

¹ In this context, ‘male’ and ‘female’ is meant to be assigned sex from birth.

Whereas there exists some investigations about gay and lesbian athletes' experiences in organized sports in the US (Anderson, 2011; Waldron, 2016; Petty & Trussell, 2018), the UK (Caudwell, 2006; 2011), Spain (Vilanova et al., 2020) and the Netherlands (Elling & Janssens, 2009), there is little empirical research on the sports club experiences of gay and lesbian athletes in Germany. Accordingly, Krell and Oldemeier (2018, p. 27) conclude: 'Sport is an area in which empirical findings on the experiences of non-heterosexual persons in Germany are particularly scarce'. Furthermore, as Anderson et al., (2016) already state, many of the previous studies with a focus on sexual diversity refer to the experiences of high school, university, collegiate and elite gay or lesbian athletes, whereas limited research exists documenting the experiences of gay and lesbian athletes in leisure sports. This research desideratum regarding the experiences of gay and lesbian recreational athletes in German sports clubs is the starting point of our study.

The relevance of the study arises from the fact that findings concerning gay and lesbian athletes' sports experiences are country-specific and cannot simply be transferred to other societies: for example, two recent large-scale studies (Menzel et al., 2019; Denison & Kitchen, 2015) reveal differences between the sport experiences of lesbian and gay people in European countries, Canada and Australia. In consideration of these differences between countries, which also might affect people's attitudes and concepts of sexuality, our investigation adds to the existing international literature. Against the background that heterosexuality is a central component of predominant traditional concepts of gender, it is being assumed that sexual non-conformity in sports – despite the tendency of increasing social acceptance – still produces instances of exclusion and discrimination (Ladda, 2017; Kavoura & Kokkonen, 2021; Scandura et al., 2019).

With regard to Germany, current laws show that in this country, gender and sexual diversity is considered an important aspect of social diversity. After all, there is the General Equal Treatment Act ('Allgemeines Gleichbehandlungsgesetz'), a federal law that aims to prevent and eliminate discrimination on the grounds of, e.g., ethnic origin, gender, religion, (dis)ability or sexual identity. In the social context of sport, questions about dealing with gender diversity have gained in importance in Germany in recent years, both in sports organizations and in sports policy as well as in (sports) scientific research. This is not least due to the current debates on gender verification procedures and the participation of intersexual and transgender athletes in sport. In the meantime, there are a large number of projects, initiatives and support measures with the aim of sensitizing people to the situation of LGBTQ+ in sport and creating public awareness of disadvantages and discrimination (examples are projects of professional clubs against homophobia in football or training measures for athletes in organized sport). The aim is to generate a willingness to take responsibility and competences in this regard by communicating appropriate strategies for action in the field of sport. Furthermore, measures aim to reduce structural disadvantages for LGBTQ+ people in sport (Bundesnetzwerktagung der queeren Sportvereine, 2018). Although the postulate of openness, recognition and tolerance towards sexual and gender diversity is widely accepted in different social fields of action (such as education and culture), sport is (still) discussed as a heteronormative field of action (Heckemeyer, 2018).

1.1 State of research

Griffin (1998) was one of the first to identify the various ways in which lesbian athletes experience explicit homophobia (e.g. verbal and physical harassment, degrading comments and deliberate exclusion) in sport. Bush et al. (2012) in a longitudinal study have determined a decline of homophobic and heterosexist attitudes against gay and lesbian athletes in team sports in the UK, and a current European-wide survey shows that people who do not comply with traditional concepts of sexuality still feel (highly) discriminated against and excluded in sports (Menzel et al., 2019). In addition, an Australian study by Symons et al. (2016) reveals that lesbian and gay athletes frequently experience sexism and homophobia in sports, with men being comparatively more likely to report homophobic incidents. The authors also indicate that typical impacts of sexist and homophobic discrimination in sports against lesbian and gay athletes are negative emotions such as sadness, anger, distress and shame. Furthermore, Osborne and Wagner (2007) point out in their quantitative study that homophobic attitudes are particularly prevalent in male team sports like football, basketball, baseball and soccer, whereas Hartmann-Tews et al. (2020) report negative experiences of gay and lesbian people in different sport contexts regardless of the type of sport (individual or team sports). However, this quantitative study indicates that negative experiences occur significantly more often in high-performance sport and far less in recreational sport. Probably the most common form of discriminatory behavior in (organized) sport towards sexual minorities is verbal harassment (Menzel et al., 2019; Hartmann-Tews et al., 2020). A further study by Hekma (1998) indicates that twenty years ago, gay men and lesbian women were discriminated against in leisure sports in the Netherlands. These individuals were either expelled from their sports clubs or brutally threatened and occasionally, gay and lesbian people were subjected to physical violence. However, it is questionable to what extent these findings from the turn of the millennium can still claim validity today (Anderson et al., 2016). Nonetheless, recent quantitative studies stress that many gay and lesbian athletes are the target of homophobic behavior, e.g. verbal slurs, bullying and assaults in team sports (Denison et al., 2020; 2020) and often consciously avoid organized sport activities due to feelings of insecurity and discomfort (e.g. Greenspan et al., 2019).

Particularly the OUTSPORT Survey (Menzel et al., 2019; Hartmann-Tews et al., 2020; 2021) provides relevant up-to-date information. The survey focuses, among others, on the experiences of gay and lesbian people who currently live in one of the 28 member states of the European Union. According to the study, 16% of all 5,5000 participants did report at least one negative personal experience (in the last twelve months) in a sport context. Thereby, discriminating incidents occur in diverse forms: Verbal insults and structural discrimination are the most common forms of homophobic occurrences. Moreover, experiences of physically crossing the line – e.g. being shoved and/or pushed – or even physical violence are not uncommon. Lesbian athletes mention their own team members most frequently as perpetrators, whereas gay athletes point to other sport participants as the most common perpetrators. Furthermore, the survey illustrates that the vast majority of respondents perceive homophobia to be a problem in sport and it shows that almost every fifth respondent refrains from participating in his or her favorite sport.

The few available studies from Germany, in which the experiences of gay and lesbian athletes in organized sport are elaborated, focus primarily on soccer (Degele & Janz, 2012; Degele, 2014; Walther-Ahrens, 2011). Thereby, soccer is described as a particular field of exclusion in which homophobic attitudes occur more frequently compared to other fields of activity. Only in the quantitative study by Hartmann-Tews et al. (2021) a broad spectrum of sports and different sports contexts are taken into account, revealing the impact of the sports context on the perception of homo-negative language. Schaaf and Gissel (2018) generally focus on physical education and intend to identify situations and types of discrimination against gay students within this subject.

Despite the listed existing studies, our investigation represents a supplement to the current state of research: *Firstly*, the novelty of our study lies in the fact that so far there are only (few) quantitative (Hartmann-Tews et al., 2020; 2021) and no qualitative studies from Germany on the experiences of gay and lesbian recreational athletes in traditional sports clubs. The only exception is a qualitative study conducted by us, which deals with the experiences of LGBTQ+ in queer sports clubs, insofar as selective reference is made here to experiences of queer recreational athletes in traditional sports clubs (Böhlke & Müller, 2020). The qualitative approach chosen in our study, which aims at understanding meaning, makes it possible for the first time to gain deeper insights into the sports experiences of gay and lesbian athletes in German sports clubs and to relate these experiences to heteronormative structures in sports. In contrast to the above-mentioned studies, which mostly explicitly asked about experiences of homo-negativity, it is our concern to reconstruct the sport experiences as openly as possible in order to be able to describe the potentials and implicit discriminatory moments of sport for lesbian and gay athletes in more detail. *Secondly*, the novelty of our study lies in the fact that it focuses on self-identified gay and lesbian sports club members that are both sports enthusiasts and experienced in sport participation in two different institutionalized contexts in Germany: in traditional sports clubs as well as queer sports clubs. As all respondents are currently members of a queer sports club, they should be specifically sensitized to the topic of 'gay and lesbian athletes in traditional sports clubs' and should have been cognitively dealing with the topic since joining a queer sports club. Furthermore, their current membership in a queer sports club allows them to (retrospectively) compare their experiences between these two different sports contexts. The fact that our study participants have been members of traditional and queer sports clubs is what fundamentally sets our study apart from previous – also international – investigations.

1.2 Objective and central issues

Discourses on diversity and inclusion stress the importance of studies that reconstruct the subjective perspective of, e.g., norm deviating and non-conforming individuals and/or groups. Concerning the realm of sport, these investigations may provide insights into the numerous prerequisites and terms within the participation in organized sports. Against the background of both the importance of reconstructing subjective perspectives (e.g. to identify the unique barriers that may challenge the sport participation of gay and lesbian people, but also to conceptualize suitable

group specific sports programs) and the insufficient state of research in Germany, this paper aims at exploring the experiences of male gay and female lesbian recreational athletes in traditional sports clubs in Germany.

The main interest is the reconstruction of situations in the context of these traditional sports clubs that are categorized as challenging by the gay and lesbian study participants with regard to their sexuality. With the present study, we try to identify barriers – in the sense of structures and norms inherent to German sports clubs – that (may) prevent gay and lesbian people from participating in traditional sports clubs on a long-term basis. Thus, our investigation aims to answer the following question: How do self-identified gay and lesbian recreational athletes experience sports in traditional sports clubs in Germany and which club-immanent problems and typical challenges can be identified? Thereby, we focus primarily on problems and challenges that can be directly related to the participants' non-conforming sexuality.

2 The heteronormative approach

In line with the state of research, the theoretical framework of this study bases on the initial assumption that experiences of self-identified gay and lesbian athletes in sports also interrelate with the group-specific attribute 'homosexual'. Thereby, our objective is to link the experiences mentioned by our study participants with heteronormative concepts and ideas that prevail in our society. Against this backdrop, the concept of heteronormativity provides the basis for our data analysis and we use the concept as a background foil to connect our findings (regarding the experiences of gay and lesbian athletes in recreational sports clubs) in a theory-based way. We consider such a linking of experiences with heteronormative attitudes and structures in the context of German club sport to be particularly necessary.

The term heteronormativity was first introduced by Warner (1991) in one of the key collections on queer theory. It built on previous concepts such as Adrienne Rich's (1978) 'Compulsory Heterosexuality' and Gayle Rubin's (1984) 'Sex Hierarchy' (Barker, 2014). Warner's basic idea is to understand heterosexuality as a fundamental category of social theoretical analyses with the aim of being able to criticize the privilege of a heterosexual culture: Heteronormativity is conceived here as a system of order that by no means refers only to 'the sexual' in the narrower sense but is inscribed into almost all social practices or institutions and is constantly reproduced by them. Accordingly, heteronormativity should be analyzed as an organized and organizing scheme of perception, action and thought (Degele, 2008, 89) that shapes individual ways of acting as well as being institutionalized and reproduced through social structures. Warner was not only interested in examining the consequences of a homophobic social system on the (supposed) 'minority' of gay and lesbian people (such as homophobic discrimination). Rather, he argued for an analysis and fundamental critique of 'hetero-culture' as a (supposedly) 'normal' basic form of social organization of society. The criticism on heteronormativity that emerged from Warner's reflections was taken up primarily in queer studies. Since then, the concept of heteronormativity has been continuously shaped, refined and revised. Heteronormativity differs from heterosexism, which is discrimination against anyone who is

not heterosexual. Since heteronormativity may be insidious as well as pervasive, it is closer to the concept of 'Mundane Heterosexism' (Clarke et al., 2010), which is embedded in everyday language and practice and typically remains unseen (Barker, 2014). In contrast, homophobia implies the fear for and dislike of homosexuality and non-conform gender behavior (Plummer, 2001).

The few sport-related studies with a heteronormative theoretical frame focus on the analysis of the meaning of (hetero)sexuality for the construction of gender dichotomy or rather hierarchical gender relations in sports (e.g. Degele & Janz, 2012; Degele, 2014). Researchers have reconstructed, among other things, the particular influence of the norm of heterosexuality in the context of the reproduction of a gender-binary, male-heterosexual-dominated sport, and in doing so have revealed processes of exclusion and discrimination of lesbian and gay people. There are also works on the media presentation of athletes (Schaaf, 2012) as well as on the regulations of international sports organizations (especially the performance category gender, see Heckemeyer, 2018), which focus on heteronormative gender conceptions and thereby put gender differences and hierarchies into the center. Thus, prior investigations do not primarily focus on the sports club as an institution with a particular structure and organization. However, sports clubs can be described as institutions with a culture that is based on heteronormativity. Heteronormative assumptions are identifiable in (partly) unchallenged structures, values and norms in the club and affect the members' interactions, whereby heteronormative and heterosexist mechanisms of action evolve (Heckemeyer & Gramespacher, 2019).

3 Methods

In accordance with the aim of our study, qualitative methods were applied. To reconstruct the subjective perspective of gay and lesbian athletes, we accomplished twelve extensive semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Witzel & Reiter, 2010). On the one hand, this type of interview allows a thematic focusing of the interviews (with regard to experiences, attitudes and motives in the field of organized sports), which makes the interviews and statements comparable. On the other hand, this type of interview made it possible for the interviewees to answer the narrative-generating questions openly and with an individually chosen accenting. Hence, open, narrative-generating questions and more focused questions alternated in order to evoke personal narratives about experiences and perceptions in the context of sport in general without losing the thematic focus of the interview on sexual minorities in club-organized sports.

All of our twelve study participants identify themselves as gay or lesbian and are 'out' about their sexuality. Three of our twelve study participants reported their own gender status as non-binary. This characteristic was reflected in the data analysis, taking into account the close intersectionality of gender, body and sexuality (Villa, 2014). However, the focus (due to the data) was primarily on the common characteristic of gay and lesbian – especially against the background that we oriented ourselves to the accenting of our interview partners, who primarily referred to their sexuality in the interviews and left their non-binary gender unthematized or only mentioned it in passing. The intersectionality of gay/lesbian with gender non-binary

can therefore only be implied in our study, and its elaboration is still pending with a view to further studies.

The study participants are German citizens, between 26 and 52 years old and members of the middle to high social class. All of them have experienced sports in different organized contexts: in traditional as well as queer sports clubs. All participants were members of a traditional sports club for at least one year and members of a queer sports club for at least six months. Currently, they are members of a queer sports club in a medium-sized city in Germany. Although all interviewees have experienced sports in queer sports clubs, this paper only focuses on their experiences in traditional sports clubs; their sport experiences in queer sports clubs have been focused in another article (see Böhlke & Müller, 2020).

All interviews were conducted by the co-author who was acquainted with some of the interviewees and contacted others at a queer sports club, after spending time there together. This ‘hanging out’-status (Woodward, 2008) ensured an undisguised in-depth look into the ‘interviewees’ world and was a major advantage for the entire study. Throughout the research process, the researchers reflexively dealt with their own perspective, e.g., the co-author’s affiliation to the group of interviewees or an existing affinity to the field and its methodological consequences. In doing so, we drew on relevant methodological explanations (see Braun & Clarke, 2013 on ‘qualitative sensibility’ and the accompanying demand for increased self-reflection on one’s own role as a researcher in the research process; see also Charmaz, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017).

The guarantee of voluntary participation in the study was a decisive principle in data collection, which was carefully taken into account by the research team. Accordingly, contact was only established with individual participants through personal enquiries by the co-author, whereas the majority of participants were recruited through the snowball principle and a public call via the mailing list of the queer sports club. All participants knew how data was to be used and published, their participation in the study based on voluntary agreement. Written informed consent was obtained from all study participants to voluntarily participate in the interviews. Confidentiality was assured to all participants; the names below are pseudonyms.

The selection of the interviewees followed a ‘theoretical sampling’ (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which was primarily oriented towards the (preliminary) analysis. In the sense of the exploratory research strategy, the aim was to identify as many different aspects as possible of the experience of club-organized sport by gay and lesbian recreational athletes, taking into account, among other things, problems and challenges related to their sexuality. For this purpose, we specifically recruited people whose stories would presumably provide a new approach to the research question.

Interviews lasted from 50 to 70 min each and were conducted between May 2019 and January 2020. The content of the interviews about the experiences in the traditional sports club comprised about 50% (min. 25 min). Even though some of the interviewees made comparisons between their experiences in traditional and queer sports clubs, the content of the thematic focus on experiences in traditional sports clubs was predetermined by our interview guide and thus clearly delineated. The fact that the experiences of the respondents in different sports settings (traditional/queer

club) are related to each other was nevertheless constantly included in the analysis of the data (see also Böhlke & Müller, 2020).

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The extensive material was analyzed according to a (constructed) Grounded Theory (GT) approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Charmaz, 2006). The data analysis was thus adapted to the explorative, intentionally open approach to the subject of the study ('experiences of gay and lesbian recreational athletes in traditional sports clubs'), which is largely unexplored in Germany. Particularly two phases in the course of the analysis can be distinguished: the initial and focused coding. During the initial open coding significant core themes were identified that emerged from the material. In the subsequent focused coding, these core categories were further developed and refined by thoroughly relating and comparing smaller pieces of data to these codes (Charmaz, 2006). The analysis and interpretation of the data involved systematic, inductive processes, circling back-and-forth between data and theory (Bryman, 2012). Both authors were initially involved in the coding of the data independently of each other. The consistency of the authors' interpretations reinforces the data presented in this paper.

Furthermore, the 'multilevel model for understanding the experience of LGBT sport participants' developed by Cunningham (2019) was helpful in the coding process, as it prescribes an analysis of the various factors (macro, meso and micro factors) that influence the experiences of LGBT athletes in the realm of sport at different levels. The model was developed with the aim of differentiating the experiences of various subgroups of LGBT people in sport at different levels.

Overall, we carried out a data analysis process that was characterized by strict adherence to a rigorously regulated coding procedure, by permanent self-reflection and by a close relationship to the data. This in turn contributed to the goal of breaking through prior assumptions brought with us and developed during the research process as best as possible. The recommendations for the development of rigor in the conduct of qualitative research in sports science identified in the international literature proved to be beneficial (e.g. Smith & McGannon, 2017; see also the eight key markers of quality in qualitative research by Tracy, 2010).

As usual, within the data analysis, we paid particular attention to inconsistencies in the interviewees' statements. In that process, theoretically saturated categories finally appeared. The following sections illuminate the main themes that emerged from the material.

4 Results

Basically, all interview partners experience sport as a leisure activity that can offer moments of joy and fun. Accordingly – and similar to the study by Bullingham (2015) from the UK – many interview partners refer to positive memories within traditional sports clubs, regardless of the sport played in the club.² However, ambivalent perspectives on organized sports can be identified in the narratives: In that respect,

² In view of the focus of this article, however, these positive experiences will not be discussed in detail here.

the respondents refer (more or less implicitly) back to challenging and problematic situations that they experienced in the sports clubs. These situations – which are focused in this paper – can (in-)directly be connected with their sexuality. Based on reported problems and situational challenges in the sports club, five sports club-specific stressors were identified. These are: (1) the necessity of an outing, (2) the sports club typical mode of communication, (3) the heteronormative pre-structuring of the sports, (4) the feeling of otherness and the assigned special role, (5) the implicit fear of discrimination. We now fully elaborate on these five stressors.

4.1 The necessity of an outing

The analysis of the interview data shows that the participants discuss regularly recurring situations that affect the communication in the sports group. For example, ‘personal conversations’, which are at times perceived as strenuous and stressful, involve small talks that are inherent in the setting and deal with topics such as relationships, love, family or sexuality. Such conversations are an integral part of club sports activities and offer the athletes the opportunity to meet their fellow athletes on a personal level beyond the sporting activity. They regularly require – implicitly and explicitly – a self-positioning with regard to the own relationship status or sexuality, whereby the anticipation of this requirement already causes insecurity and discomfort on the side of some respondents:

‘... they already talked about boys. I was a bit scared that I would be asked if I had a boyfriend. I would never have told anyone [in the volleyball club] that I had a girlfriend’ (Doro).

Situations that require a self-outing usually arise unpredictably, so that those affected must react spontaneously. This often creates an inner conflict, which is realized as a weighing up of self-outing and concealment of one’s own sexuality. The fear of irritation and prejudice is based on the heteronormative expectations of others, which are anticipated by the interviewees and which could prove to be a problem for them with regard to their non-conforming sexuality in the domain of sport.

Especially the avoidance of a coming out is communicated as a problem. This is relevant insofar as previous studies show that the perceived need to hide the own sexuality from others contributes to stress and consequent negative health impacts (Pereira & Costa, 2016; DiPlacido, 1998). Non-classifiability with regard to sexuality causes skepticism and irritation in others: *‘[In the track and field club], I sometimes felt so strangely eyed, so fundamentally, because I was not so assignable’ (Nick).* The participation in personal conversations can be considered as necessary for a long-term acceptance in the sports group, whereas getting out of such personal conversations seems to be the reason for feelings of exclusion from the group: *‘They were somehow talking about boys and I think you can feel that somehow, on both sides. And this atmosphere was somehow uncomfortable. So I was already a little bit left out [in the volleyball club]’ (Claire).* In this respect, it can be assumed that the own sexuality – even in recreational sports settings – provides essential information about people. For many interviewees this results in an unpleasant pressure to take action and come out of the closet.

4.2 The sports club typical mode of communication

Negative feelings also arise for some interviewees in the context of remarks made by fellow athletes and coaches based on heteronormative concepts. The sports club turns out to be a social space with a specific mode of communication, which is characterized by bluntness, emphasized looseness and irony and in which gender- or sexuality-related (sometimes suggestive) comments and jokes are part of everyday life. Although most respondents do not categorize these comments as deliberately discriminatory, but rather as 'normality', in some cases they trigger negative emotions:

'I was also in a sports group, where the female instructor often made such sayings, so in a woman-man-perspective. So in the direction, the goal is to get a well-trained body for the man at home, who is happy then. I always thought that was just stupid' (Doro).

'In the village, soccer club. There, people are not too sensible with each other. And these macho comments in the dressing room after the game are actually the rule' (Tim).

Although usually not directly addressed personally, the interviewees in such situations apparently feel uncomfortable not only with regard to the sexualized orientation of a comment or joke, but also with regard to the underlying heteronormative understanding of couple relationships, which they themselves do not comply with. Discontent arises on the one hand due to the visualization of solidified normative conceptions in society and on the other hand due to one's own otherness. The question of how girls negotiated ideal femininity in physical education and out-of-school sport and leisure was recently taken up by Hill (2015). Her study indicates that these girls highlight 'othering' discourses of able and gendered bodies that they positioned themselves among.

4.3 The heteronormative pre-structuring of the sports

The interviewees repeatedly mention subjective problems in sports clubs that are related to a binary gender understanding or heteronormativity that pre-structures the setting. Primarily, they refer to (1) the structures of the sports within the clubs, (2) gender and sexuality stereotypical ideas about sports and (3) uncomfortable incidents in the changing room.

Sport disciplines, in which specific pair formations are obligatory and therefore heteronormativity is being reflected in, seem to be potentially problematic for those who identify themselves as gay or lesbian (on the dominance of heteronormative ideas and concepts in sport, see e.g. Heckemeyer 2018). For instance, one female respondent was together with her girlfriend in search of a dancing course within her sports club that is explicitly open to any diverse pair-constellations. However, the norm of heterogender pair formation in dancing did impede the search of an appropriate course: *'We didn't want to visit a normal dancing course. Then, you are the lesbian pair. And then 'well, in our dance course we have two lesbians'. Gosh, I always find that annoying'* (Doro). The statement illustrates that lesbian and gay athletes sometimes feel unpleasantly exposed in their own sexuality – a highly personal and intimate trait – due to the heteronormative pre-structuring of sports within the clubs.

The consequence of this is that the interviewee, together with her partner, searches specifically for a dance course that is explicitly open to diverse couple constellations in order not to become the focus of the group ‘as a lesbian’.

However, it is not only the organizational structure of sport, which is perceived as unchangeable, that pose challenges for the respondents. Even deeply rooted heteronormative ideas of ‘typical’ male and female, or lesbian and gay sports can inhibit participation in sports to the extent that the corresponding cliché – in the sense of involuntary coming out – is to be avoided: *‘One reason why I quit soccer at thirteen or fourteen was the vague thought that soccer is a cliché. So, short hair and playing soccer, that’s kind of stereotypical for lesbians and I wanted to get away from that’* (Zina).

This statement illustrates the complexity of the binary concept of gender in conjunction with assumptions of hetero- and homosexuality as well as its problematic impacts on the interviewees who after all identify themselves as gay or lesbian. Many of the interviewees do not want to provide any breeding ground for the cliché and consciously distance themselves from certain sports contexts. However, interviewees who define themselves as gay also express that at times they do not feel comfortable in the actually preferred sport of soccer or other heteronormatively loaded sports. The reason for this is on the one hand a feeling of otherness and on the other hand the fear of discrimination and exclusion due to their own sexuality. This is particularly the case in ‘male-dominated’ soccer:

‘Well, in soccer, people do usually shout at the sidelines, the coach for example, and sometimes like ‘bite the bullet and get it done, he’s a pussy. They’re all pussies’. Thus, rather behaving like a macho, somehow. And also comments like ‘he plays like a sissy’ or ‘like a gay’. Gay as a cussword. I did definitely distance myself from it’ (Simon).

The use of ‘gay’ as a discrediting term for sporting deficits refers to a heteronormative pattern of action in sport, in which gender-related differentiation interlocks with hierarchical processes and implies discrimination against gay and lesbian people.

Repeatedly, the interviewees refer to experiences in the locker room, which are called ‘classic’ areas of concern with a view to queer people in sports (Herrick & Duncan, 2018; Hekma, 1998). In that context, many respondents mention situations of insecurity, shame and discomfort that arise from the apprehension of being ‘outed’ as a non-heterosexual by others through glances or actions. Furthermore, these situations ground on the apprehension of being categorized by teammates as interested in or intrusive after the own coming out. One female interviewee sums it up: *‘In the changing room [of our volleyball club], I somehow got the impression that I have to be very careful with my looks and my behavior, although I am definitely a person who looks away defensively when someone changes clothes’* (Bente).

Whereas some interviewees report that their position in the sports group improved significantly after their coming out (and the accompanying removal of irritation and skepticism about themselves), others – as in the illustrative example above – report feelings of growing discomfort due to fear of discrimination. Again, this fear of discrimination seems in many cases to be the main reason for hiding and concealing one’s own sexuality or refraining from an outing in the sports club.

4.4 The feeling of otherness and the assigned special role

Usually, gay and lesbian people are the minority in traditional sports clubs in Germany. In this regard, the interviewees mention discomfort regarding their own experiences of non-conforming, which arise due to their sexuality and are manifested on different levels. Discomfort is being articulated in the interviews with references to processes of 'othering' by teammates concerning the own sexuality. One interviewee who was out at the time of her membership in the sports club mentions that she had been assigned to a special role in the sports group. Thereby, her discomfort bases on the fact that she was the only lesbian in that group and was reduced to this characteristic by others:

'I feel really uncomfortable being the one who is so completely different in some way. It's a role that's really too stressful for me. It awakens the image in me, everyone writes me down on this thing. And I am much more, I am in this case not only my sexuality or that I live with a woman, but I am also this and that' (Biggi).

Biggi's special role within the sports club is defined on the one hand by her own sense of otherness and is self-constructed in this respect. However, the assumption of this role assignment is also established in Biggi's observations of the behavior of others towards her, such as the non-inclusion of her person in the conversations of her fellow athletes about heterosexual couple relationships and her reaction to this. Consequently, we can speak of an interactive construction of otherness.

Behavior of fellow sportsmen and -women striving for tolerance leads to the fact that lesbian and gay athletes feel partially exposed in their own sexuality. In the following example, it is the supposedly well-intentioned, explicit invitation of the female partner of a lesbian study participant to focus on her relationship life, thus marking being different:

'I don't want to be the one lesbian who is asked as a lesbian, like, 'Oh, you can bring your girlfriend with you'. Yes, if I bring my girlfriend, why do we have to talk about it? It's meant to be nice, but why does it have to be a topic at all?' (Nora).

Regardless of one's own coming out, some interviewees also describe a missing sense of belonging to the club that interrelates with a diffuse feeling of otherness: *'From my nature, in the group [of our soccer club], they were all different somehow. I somehow had the feeling that I did not belong there'* (Simon). Other interview partners also express this: *'Sometimes [in the swimming club], I felt like...an alien. Hence, different. Although nobody did say anything'* (Dirk). By comparing oneself with fellow athletes, otherness is constructed, e.g., in non-heteronormative behavior: *'I did wear very loose clothes. I was dressed rather male, at least not typical female and somehow the others [in the volleyball club] were more like chicks. I did not really fit in there'* (Lisa).

Thereby, supposedly overemphasized gender stereotypical behavior of fellow athletes is often negatively highlighted or discredited: *'I don't know, these chicks in the [basketball] team, I don't like that at all. I am not like that'* (Zina). Distinction to 'the other' members of the sports group is constructed here in the devaluation of others (same sex), who are bound to (negatively condemned) heteronormative ideas.

4.5 The implicit fear of discrimination

The data indicate that many study participants have the subliminal fear of discrimination or marginalization in the sports club due to their sexuality. Particularly those interviewees who have already experienced their sexuality in everyday life as negatively connoted by others feel threatened by discrimination or disregard: *'I think that this is kind of a stigma. [In what way?] Well, you are different from the rest. Maybe that would have been weird, I don't know, in the shower or just banalities'* (Luan).

Contrary to the results of a quantitative German study (Menzel et al., 2019; Hartmann-Tews et al., 2020) only one of our participants mentions experiences of purposive discrimination in the sports club:

'We were several lesbian women in our team, temporary we even had a lesbian couple. Partially, this was noted by others beyond our [basketball] club. I remember being derogatory called 'the lesbian team' by others and once, during a game, when more intimate physical battles appeared under the basket they used comments like 'this lesbian keeps touching me'' (Claire).

However, discrimination is not only experienced in the interaction with opponents, but sometimes also within the own team. In this context, Zoe refers to a situation that was reported to her by her girlfriend: After her coming out, some of her teammates 'refused to shower with her'. Indeed, like almost all other interviewees, Zoe also does not mention any self-experienced discriminations in the club. Nevertheless, occasionally the interviewees mention problematic situations in other sports contexts (the school's locker room) after a verbalized coming out: *'After my coming out, it was pretty difficult. A classmate did say in the locker room kind of 'be careful that Bente doesn't jump on you''* (Bente).

In summary, only in few cases the fear of discrimination and exclusion in the context of club sports bases on *personal* experiences. Instead, it typically bases on experiences in other contexts or *experiences of others* that were told. Although many respondents say that nowadays, in our most advanced and tolerant society gay and lesbian people are less or not at risk of being discriminated against anymore (Simon: *'Nowadays, it is normal in society, it is not extraordinary anymore to be gay'*), several interviewees reflect sports as a particularly vulnerable field of action (see also Menzel et al., 2019, who describe that around 90 per cent of their participants regard homo- and transphobia in sports as a current problem).

In that context, many respondents assume that the risk of discrimination depends on the sports discipline and is more relevant in disciplines that imply gender stereotyping, since 'non-conform gender behavior' is more apparent. Thereby, especially male-dominated disciplines, e.g. soccer or handball, are described as particularly vulnerable for discrimination: *'I have the impression that discrimination rather occurs in soccer or handball'* (Tim). To what extent queer people share this estimation is shown by the findings of Menzel et al., (2019), who state that sexual minorities feel extraordinarily excluded in disciplines like football, swimming, dancing and martial arts. Other participants of our study relativize the fear of discrimination in the sports club to the extent that they assume a connection between athletic competence and the risk of discrimination: Whereas sportive competence seems to lower the risk of

discrimination and exclusion, sportive incompetence is considered a cardinal point of attack.

5 Discussion and conclusion

Based on in-depth interview data, this paper explored how self-identified gay and lesbian athletes experience recreational sport in German sports clubs and which particular challenges they are confronted with. Five main stressors related to the interviewees' non-conform sexuality have been identified: (1) the necessity of an outing, (2) the sports club typical mode of communication, (3) the heteronormative pre-structuring of the sports, (4) the feeling of otherness and the assigned special role, (5) the implicit fear of discrimination.

In consideration of all interview data, findings show that gay and lesbian recreational athletes in German sports clubs do not experience much discrimination on an explicit level. After all, very few of our twelve interview partners report experiences of intentional discrimination with regard to their sexuality in sports clubs. Against this background, our findings are consistent with results of current studies investigating gay elite sports athletes in Spain (Vilanova et al., 2020). However, many of our study participants report that they hide their sexuality in the sports club. The increasing tolerance towards and acceptance of gay and lesbian people in the German society (Küpper et al., 2017) along with our study participants' concealment concerning their own sexuality in the sports club could be a plausible reason for our participants' little experiences of explicit discrimination within the clubs. In this context, in many cases their own sexuality remains unnoticed or rather invisible for others. Such a pattern of systematic veiling of one's own sexuality in sports does not seem unusual (Edwards et al., 2016). Furthermore, it is important to take into account that discrimination (often) bases on personal perceptions and is therefore shaped subjectively. Thus, our study participants may not categorize specific situations as discriminating against (that others may do) – also due to their socialization in the realm of recreational sport and their knowledge about the sports club typical mode of communication. In that sense, they may be used to and familiar with 'easy-going' comments that others may interpret as discriminatory or even homophobic. Thereby, these comments can be categorized as discriminating against and homophobic from an outside (objective) perspective, whereas the interviewees themselves may be (more) tolerant in that way.

The conscious concealment of one's own sexuality in the sports club can be interpreted as a strategy against possible discrimination, exclusion and marginalization. In that sense, it is also a strategy to prevent trouble and discomfort or rather just annoying questions by heterosexual club members about their own sexuality. Thereby, the conscious concealment is associated with the gay and lesbian athletes' fear of others' homophobic attitudes or heteronormative concepts. After all, it is mainly the discussion about and reduction of their sexuality that is experienced as problematic. Not disclosing their own sexuality on the other side may be interpreted as something unnoticed: finally, people may not see a need to disclose personal, intimate details about oneself.

The feeling shared by many of our participants of having to hide their own sexuality is based on their assumption of the partial persistence of heteronormative ways of thinking in the German society and the accompanying explicit and implicit intolerance towards non-heterosexuality. However, there are harms with the concealment itself, including the risk of dropping out of sports: After all, a qualitative study we conducted in Germany indicates that queer athletes leave traditional sports clubs due to their discomfort with the concealment of their own sexuality (Böhlke & Müller, 2020). Additionally, the concealment of the own sexuality could prove to be a source of stress, which in turn can have a negative impact on gay and lesbian athletes' mental health (Feldman & Wright, 2013; Pereira & Costa, 2016).

An overarching finding of our study is that discomfort in the sports club often does not ground on specific experiences of discrimination, exclusion and marginalization but rather on a subtle feeling of otherness in the sports club. This feeling in turn can be traced back to a heteronormative climate in the sports clubs – similar to how it is also shown in physical education (Landi, 2019; Müller & Böhlke, 2021). Heteronormative concepts and assumptions are not only reflected in gender-segregating and gender-hierarchizing structures of sport; they rather are reproduced in interactions between the individuals in the sports group. Thereby, these heteronormative concepts and assumptions are sometimes not categorized as 'discrimination' but implicitly trigger feelings of discomfort.

It should be clear that those situations, which are categorized as problematic by our interviewees often base on communication. Herrick et al., (2020, p. 431) also address this aspect in their study, they sum up: 'Words are more powerful than sticks and stones'. In that manner, communication processes can be seen as a part of the problem. Thereby, heterosexuality as a norm is inherent in statements (about constellations concerning dance couples, e.g.) which are made in personal addresses. To minimize feelings of discomfort in the sports club (and also in other contexts) in the future, we consider Krane's (2016, p. 243) recommendation as a relative easy and effective step: 'Making simple changes in language can have a large impact on perceived inclusiveness. For example, rather than referring to the girlfriends of members of a men's team, talk about partners or the people they are dating. Avoiding the assumption that everyone on a team is heterosexual opens the door for athletes to feel comfortable being themselves'.

A first step towards implementing these valuable recommendations in practice would be to confront all stakeholders with scientific findings regarding the problems and challenges of queer people in sport. This follows the goal of sensitizing stakeholders in sport to the special situation of queer people on the one hand, and on the other hand, to initiate conversations about the often taboo topic of sexual diversity. In addition, the training and further education of trainers and other people working in the field on this topic seems necessary. These people should refer to internationally available conceptual ideas on dealing with sexual diversity in sport (e.g. Van der Steeg et al., 2021). Crucial for a better inclusiveness of the sports club is both sportspeople's openness and sensibility. After all, sport can be described as a field of action, in which a particular use of language is customary: Against the backdrop that 'easy-going' and insinuating comments are a common part of communication in many sports clubs, it is important to sensitize others (especially heterosexual people)

in this respect. Finally, these easy-going and insinuating comments do reproduce heterosexuality as a norm and may increase the risk of discrimination.

As a matter of course, our study is not free from limitations: One limitation of our study is the selection-bias concerning our interviewees who are without exception members of a queer sports club. Insofar, we did not take into account the sports experiences of gay and lesbian athletes that are satisfied members of traditional sports clubs and that do not experience comparable stressors or challenges in the club. However, some of our interviewees are currently still members of both a queer and a traditional sports club so that our investigation still takes into account diverse perspectives on traditional sports clubs in Germany. Moreover, the complexity of the social construction process of knowledge with regard to the generalizability of findings (e.g. in the sense of formal theory building) must be taken into account in a limiting manner (Charmaz, 2006).

Another limitation of our study is the fact that it neglects intersectional perspectives, which seem to be quite relevant. The findings already hint at the intersectionality of sexuality, body and gender (Villa, 2014), which was not the main focus of our investigation. It seems appropriate to reveal these (and other) intersectional categories (e.g. ethnicity, disability) in follow-up research and their significance for the production of a heteronormative order in sport. Future studies could also take a comparative look at different types of sports or also work out possible nuances in which team sports and individual sports in clubs differ from each other. In this respect, our study offers starting points for various follow-up studies on the experience of sport in (German) sports clubs from the perspective of sexual minorities. However, our study may also offer starting points for follow-up studies that focus on leisure time activities other than sport.

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