Examination of Students' Attitudes Toward Homosexual Athletes—A Case Study of Sports Sciences

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The aim of this study is to determine Physical Education and Sport Department students' attitudes toward homosexual athletes. This study is the first study investigating the homophobia of physical education students who are expected to play a role in the development of sports and its basic education. The sample of the study is 102 students. The participant students were aged between 18-28 years old and the mean age was 21.67. To collect data, the Turkish version of the "Homophobia in Sports Scale" was used. With the aim of determining if there was a difference between the male and the female students' attitudes, chi-square goodness-of-fit-test and Mann-Whitney *U* test were employed. The differences were tested at the significance level of 0.05. Half of the female participants and 40% of the male participants stated that there would be no change in their thoughts about a "male" athlete revealing that he was a gay; moreover, 48.93% of the female participants and 43.63% of the male participants stated that there would be no change in their thoughts about a "female" athlete revealing that she was a lesbian. In relation to the question "If an athlete revealed his sexual preference, how would this confession change thoughts of fans of other sports branches?" 68.08% of the female participants and 69.09% of the male participants stated that their thoughts would change negatively. When all the participants were taken into account, it was observed that 5.88% of those who stated that thoughts of others would change positively. The indifference states of the participants were not different. Although the male and the female physical education student teachers held positive opinions of homosexual athletes within the scope of the Homophobia in Sports Scale, they had some negative opinions in some parameters. It will be useful to implement teacher training programs to develop attitudes and behaviors against discrimination in the society. Moreover, works to increase tolerance toward different lifestyles in the society will help to develop positive attitude toward homosexuality.

Keywords: homophobia, homosexuality, gay athlete, lesbian athlete

Introduction

Homosexuality derives from the ancient Greek word "amos" meaning "same" and the Latin word "sexus" meaning "sexuality" and is defined as an individual's emotional and sexual orientation toward another of the same sex (American Psychological Association [APA], 2008). Homosexuality dates back to ancient times. It has been known since the oldest times. In almost all cultures and great religions, homosexuality has been

accepted as an abnormal sexual behavior. Throughout human history, many civilizations have accepted homosexual relations less and heterosexual relations more (Uğurlu, 1999).

A male homosexual individual is called "gay," a female homosexual individual is called "lesbian," an individual having orientation toward both sexes is called "bisexual," the one who has changed sex is called "transsexual," and the one having orientation toward the opposite sex is called "heterosexual" (APA Help Center, 2009). For the last 20 years, there has been an increase in the number of empirical studies on homosexuality and attitudes toward homosexuality. In a society, attitudes toward homosexuality and heterosexuality change from individual to individual. While many people regard homosexuality as acceptable, some state that they fear when they know there is a homosexual person around them. In Turkish society, there is not an official definition seeing lesbianism or being a gay as an illness or a crime (Oksal, 2008; Yılmaz, 2002). Families' traditional attitudes become determinant in behaviors toward lesbians and gays. Families either disregard or disown their children. Few families pretend not to know about the matter or exhibit positive attitudes toward this lifestyle of their children's (Oksal, 2008).

Humans' focusing only on norms related to sexual relationship without thinking of romantism and love and not sharing experiences of sexual relationships with homosexual individuals and attitudes toward life can be considered as reasons for fear and negative attitudes toward homosexuality (Hansen, 1982). In every area of social life, there have always been a general fear, worry, and intolerance toward homosexuals and humans reflect these in their attitudes and behaviors in various ways, which is called "homophobia" (Griffin, 1998).

Like in social life and such areas as education and profession (APA, 2008) and also sports, homosexual athletes, trainers, physical education teachers, administrators, and others are faced with various homophobic attitudes and behaviors. These include rejection by team mates and trainers, exposure to inappropriate words and jokes in relation to their homosexuality, exposure to various physical and psychological torture, and lack of opportunity to continue their careers (Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport [CAAWS], 2006; Demers, 2006; Walther, 2006).

As one of the main reasons for this, Kimmel (1994) stated that sport has a heterosexual structure and sportsmen try to preserve this structure. That homophobic attitudes and behaviors are exhibited toward homosexuals all over the world has been put forward by many research studies (Furnham & Saito, 2009; Altemeyer, 2001; Lippincott, Wlazelek, & Schumacher, 2000; Weishut, 2000; Pratte, 1993). Although there are various scientific studies on homosexuality in Turkey, the number is limited. These studies have emphasized that negative attitudes exhibited toward homosexuals depend on traditional gender roles transferred from generation to generation and adopted in Turkish society. However, these negative attitudes are less observed in individuals having social ties with homosexual individuals (Oksal, 2008; Çırakoğlu, 2006; Sakalli, 2002a, 2002b, & 2002c; Sakalli & Uğurlu, 2001).

However, in the field of sports, there are only a few scientific studies on homosexuality. With the aim of eliminating homophobic attitudes and behaviors in both social and sports areas, scientific meetings and activities are organized and what can be done is discussed and various precautions are taken all over the world. In Turkey, although homophobic attitudes and behaviors are clearly observed especially in some sports branches, it is very important that homophobia should be put forward once more through scientific studies and precautions should be taken to eliminate homophobia. This study is important in that it is the first study investigating into homophobia of physical education student teachers to play a role in the development of sports

and its basic education. Physical education teachers are the educators having responsibility in preventing homophobic attitudes in sports. The purpose of the present study is to compare physical education student teachers' attitudes toward homosexual athletes according to gender.

Method

Sample Group

The study was carried out in the spring and summer semesters of the 2013-2014 academic year in Bursa, Turkey. The population of the study was composed of 250 students from the Physical Education and Sport Department of the Sports Sciences Faculty of Uludag University and the study sample consisted of a total of 102 students, (Female = 47, Mean age = 20.95; Male = 55, Mean age = 22.27). A total of 125 volunteer students were reached and 23 questionnaires and scales were omitted. The participant students were aged between 18-28 years old and the mean age was 21.67. For the study group, students were selected especially from different class levels rather than a single class level.

Data Collection Tool

The Homophobia in Sports Scale was prepared by two companies called Witecks-Combs Communications and Haris Interactive (WC/HI) and making Internet-based and large-scale public opinion polls in the United States (U.S.) with the aim of determining general attitude exhibited nationwide toward gay athletes within the scope of professional sports (WC/HI, 2002). The original scale was administered online over the Internet to 2,191 Americans cross-sectionally. The scale was translated and adapted into Turkish by Saraç (2006).

In the first section, which includes three questions, of the Homophobia in Sports Scale composed of a total of three sections, there are questions aiming to determine participants' attitudes toward gay and lesbian athletes disclosing their sexual preferences and what participants think about others' attitudes toward gay and lesbian athletes disclosing their sexual preferences (For example: "Question: If a professional male athlete confessed that he was a gay, how would this personal confession affect your feelings toward him? Alternatives: (a) I would have more positive opinion of him; and (b) I would not have a positive opinion of him at all").

The second section is composed of the questions aiming to determine if athletes revealing their sexual preferences are accepted by fans of various sports branches (For example: "Question: Fans of which of the following sports branch(es) would be more tolerant toward athletes revealing their sexual preferences honestly to the society as gay, lesbian, or bisexual and more acceptable of this situation? Alternatives: For 16 different sports branches: (a) Definitely not favorable; and (b) Definitely favorable"). The attitude items in the second section are answered via using a Likert-type scale prepared according to the 4-point scaling system.

In the third section, the participants are asked to mark from among appropriate positive and negative statements describing gay and lesbian athletes revealing their sexual preferences (For example: "Question: Which words/statements would you use to describe an active or popular athlete when she/he revealed her/his sexual preference? Please mark all the statements coming to your mind. Alternatives include six positive statements, such as honest and brave, and 10 negative statements, such as seeking publicity and rebellious"). Moreover, necessary space was allotted for participants to write down statements other than specified ones.

Procedure

The data collection tool and the personal information form were combined into a single form and

administered to the participants in this way. In the data collection procedure, in order to collect data for the study, necessary permission was taken from the teaching staff members and schedules were determined. Prior to the lesson, the students were informed about the aim of the scale and it was administered based on name privacy and voluntariness. It took about 10-15 minutes to complete the scale.

Data Analysis

In the analysis of the data obtained from the Attitude Toward Homosexual Athletes Scale, in order to determine the difference between the female and the male student teachers' attitudes, chi-square and Mann-Whitney *U* tests were applied. The differences were tested at the significance level of 0.05.

Findings

As a result of the statistical analyses, 51.06% of the female participants and 40% of the male participants stated that they would not change their opinions of a "male" athlete revealing that he was a gay. At the same time, 42% of the female participants and 49% of the male participants stated that they would have a negative opinion of a male athlete revealing that he was a gay (see Table 1).

Table 1

Comparison of Answers Given to the Question "If a Professional Male Athlete Revealed That He Was a Gay, How Would This Personal Confession Affect Your Opinion of Him?" According to Gender

Answers	Gender		Total (N)
	Female (N)	Male (N)	
I would have a much more positive opinion of him.	2	2	4
I would have a more positive opinion of him.	1	4	5
I would not have a different opinion of him.	24	22	48
I would not have a positive opinion of him.	10	10	20
I would not have a positive opinion of him at all.	10	17	27
Total	47	55	102

Note. *Mann-Whitney *U* test is significant at $p < 0.05$ level.

The female and the male participants' feelings about "a professional male athlete revealing that he was a gay" did not differ ($z = -0.597$; $p > 0.05$; $M_{\text{female}} = 49.72$; $M_{\text{male}} = 53.02$).

About half of the female participants (48.93%) and 43.63% of the male participants stated that they would not have a different opinion of a "female" athlete revealing that she was a lesbian. At the same time, 44.68% of the female participants and 43.63% of the male participants stated that they would have a negative opinion of a female athlete revealing that she was a lesbian. However, 6.38% of the female participants and 12.72% of the male participants stated that they would have a positive opinion of a lesbian athlete (see Table 2).

The feelings of the female and the male participants about "a professional female athlete revealing that she was a lesbian" did not differ ($z = -0.279$; $p > 0.05$; $M_{\text{female}} = 52.33$; $M_{\text{male}} = 50.79$).

Moreover, 68.08% of the female participants and 69.09% of the male participants thought that fans of other sports branches would have a negative opinion of a female athlete upon revealing/confessing her sexual preference. Besides this, when all the participants were taken into account, it was observed that 5.88% of the participants stated that fans of other sports branches would have a positive opinion of her (see Table 3).

Table 2

Comparison of the Question "If a Professional Female Athlete Revealed That She Was a Lesbian, How Would This Personal Confession Affect Your Feelings About This Person" According to Gender

Answers	Gender		Total (N)
	Female (N)	Male (N)	
I would have a much more positive opinion of her.	2	2	4
I would have a more positive opinion of her.	1	5	6
My opinion of her would not change.	23	24	47
I would not have a positive opinion of her.	10	10	20
I would not have a positive opinion of her at all.	11	14	25
Total	47	55	102

Note. *Mann-Whitney *U* test is significant at $p < 0.05$ level.

Table 3

Comparison of the Question "How Would Sexual Preferences of a Female Athlete Revealing/Confessing Her Sexual Preference Affect Thoughts of Fans of Other Sports About This Athlete" According to Gender

Answers	Gender		Total (N)
	Female (N)	Male (N)	
They think much more positively about this athlete	1	2	3
They think more positively about this athlete	2	1	3
Their thoughts about this athlete do not change	12	14	26
They think more negatively about this athlete	26	21	47
They think much more negatively about this athlete	6	17	23
Total	47	55	102

Note. *Mann-Whitney *U* test is significant at $p < 0.05$ level.

The female and the male participants did not give different answers to the question "If an athlete revealed that she was a lesbian, how would other athletes' opinions of this confessing athlete change" ($z = -1.239$; $p > 0.05$; $M_{\text{female}} = 47.83$; $M_{\text{male}} = 54.64$).

Table 4 shows the analysis results of the question "Which words/statements would you use to describe the active and popular athlete if she/he revealed that she/he was a lesbian/gay?" which is the other part of the scale.

The positive statements used by the female and the male participants "to describe an active or popular male athlete when he confessed that he was a gay," such as "honest," "brave," "heroic," "objective/unbiased/prudent," and "being himself" did not differ. Moreover, the indifference states of the female and the male participants were not different, either ($p > 0.05$).

The positive statements used by the female and the male participants "to describe an active or popular female athlete when she revealed that she was a lesbian," such as "honest," "brave," "heroic," "objective/unbiased/prudent," and "being herself" did not differ. Moreover, the indifference states of the female and the male participants were not different, either ($p > 0.05$).

The male participants used such negative statements as "publicity-seeking" ($X^2 = 5.278$; $p < 0.05$), "rebellious" ($X^2 = 4.814$; $p < 0.05$), "unhappy" ($X^2 = 7.610$; $p < 0.05$), and "mentally unstable" ($X^2 = 7.777$; $p < 0.05$) in order "to describe an active and popular male athlete when he confessed that he was a gay" significantly more than the female participants.

The negative statements used by the female and the male participants "to describe an active or popular

male athlete when he confessed that he was a gay,” such as “perverted,” “selfish,” “dismissive,” “sinful,” “wooly-minded,” and “stupid” did not differ ($p > 0.05$).

Table 4

Distribution of the Answers Given to the Question “Which Words/Statements Would You Use to Describe an Active and Popular Athlete When She/He Confessed That She/He Is a Homosexual?” According to Gender

		Description for gay athlete			Description for lesbian athlete		
		Female (N)	Male (N)	Total (N)	Female (N)	Male (N)	Total (N)
Positive statements	Honest	22	31	53	22	23	45
	Brave	24	36	60	29	29	58
	Heroic	8	9	17	11	8	19
	Objective/unbiased/prudent	7	8	15	9	9	18
	Being himself/herself	19	24	43	22	20	42
	Not my concern	17	18	35	21	16	37
Negative statements	Publicity-seeking	5*	16*	21	7	12	19
	Rebellious	3*	12*	15	3	8	11
	Perverted	4	11	15	6	11	17
	Unhappy	3*	15*	18	6	12	18
	Selfish	2	5	7	0*	6*	6
	Dismissive	3	3	6	2	6	8
	Sinful	7	13	20	10	12	22
	Wooly-minded	11	14	25	13	13	26
	Stupid	3	5	8	2	5	7
	Mentally unstable	4*	17*	21	6*	17*	23

Note. *Chi-square test is significant at $p < 0.05$ level.

The negative statements used by the female and the male participants “to describe an active or popular female athlete when she revealed that she was a lesbian,” such as “publicity-seeking,” “rebellious,” “perverted,” “unhappy,” “dismissive,” “sinful,” “wooly-minded,” and “stupid” did not differ ($p > 0.05$).

The male participants used such negative statements as “selfish” ($X^2 = 5.448$; $p < 0.05$) and “mentally-unstable” ($X^2 = 4.777$; $p < 0.05$) “to describe an active or popular female athlete when she revealed that she was a lesbian” significantly more than the female participants.

In the data obtained from the section where the participants were asked for their opinions about fans’ tolerance levels in response to homosexual athletes’ revealing their sexual preferences to the society according to sports branches, it was found that the participant female and the male students thought that fans of such sports branches as wrestling ($n = 69$; 67.64%), football ($n = 56$; 53.92%), boxing ($n = 63$; 61.76%), and weight-lifting ($n = 60$; 58.82%) would not be tolerant and acceptable toward these athletes. Besides this, in the sports branches of golf ($n = 75$; 73.52%), swimming ($n = 73$; 71.56%), and diving ($n = 73$; 71.56%), it was determined that the female and the male participants held the opinion that fans of these sports branches would be more tolerant and acceptable toward these athletes (see Table 5).

The female and the male participants did not give different answers with respect to the tolerance levels of fans of the sports branches of football ($z = -1.278$), ice hockey ($z = -1.340$), auto racing ($z = -1.700$), golf ($z = -1.091$), track and field ($z = -1.141$), swimming ($z = -0.467$), diving ($z = -0.007$), gymnastics ($z = -0.475$), tennis ($z = -0.795$), figure skating ($z = -0.095$), wrestling ($z = -1.496$), boxing ($z = -1.400$), weight-lifting ($z = -1.001$) toward “athletes revealing their homosexual preferences honestly” ($p > 0.05$).

Table 5

Comparison of the Question "Fans of Which of the Following Sports Branches Would Be More Tolerant and Acceptable Toward Athletes Revealing Their Sexual Preferences Honestly to the Society" According to Gender

Sports branch	Definitely unacceptable		Little acceptable		Acceptable		Definitely acceptable	
	Female (N)	Male (N)	Female (N)	Male (N)	Female (N)	Male (N)	Female (N)	Male (N)
Football	23	33	9	11	13	9	2	2
Ice hockey	10	20	17	17	18	14	2	4
Auto racing	9	23	15	12	20	14	3	6
Rugby*	12	24	12	15	20	12	3	4
Basketball*	13	24	13	18	18	10	3	3
Baseball*	8	22	12	15	24	12	3	6
Golf	10	17	11	15	19	14	7	9
Track and field	10	22	16	11	19	18	2	4
Swimming	9	20	21	12	14	17	3	6
Diving	11	18	19	15	16	16	1	6
Gymnastics	13	19	12	11	17	20	5	5
Tennis	12	21	18	16	16	14	1	4
Figure skating	14	19	16	14	14	16	3	6
Wrestling	28	41	9	6	7	5	3	3
Boxing	25	38	9	6	12	8	1	3
Weight-lifting	25	35	10	10	11	7	1	3

Note. *Mann-Whitney *U* test is significant at $p < 0.05$ level.

The female and the male participants gave different answers with respect to the tolerance levels of fans of the sports branches of rugby ($z = -2.034$; $p > 0.05$; $M_{\text{female}} = 57.64$; $M_{\text{male}} = 46.25$), basketball ($z = -2.112$; $p > 0.05$; $M_{\text{female}} = 57.86$; $M_{\text{male}} = 46.06$), and baseball ($z = -2.373$; $p > 0.05$; $M_{\text{female}} = 58.68$; $M_{\text{male}} = 45.36$) "athletes revealing their homosexual preferences honestly" ($p < 0.05$). Compared to the male participants, the female participants held more positive opinions about the possibility that fans of these three sports branches would be more tolerant and acceptable toward "athletes revealing honestly that they were homosexual."

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study aiming to measure the attitudes of the female and the male student teachers enrolled in the Physical Education and Sport Department toward homosexual athletes, no differences were determined between the participants' attitudes toward both "female" and "male" athletes revealing their sexual preferences. Moreover, in studies made on gender differences in Turkey, different results were obtained. In these studies, it was found that the female participants had more positive attitudes toward homosexuals than their male counterparts (Sakalli, 2002a; Ummak, 2012; Çırakoğlu, 2006). In a study by Saraç and Ehem Rahim (2009), too, it was determined that there were no differences between the female and the male participants' opinions of female homosexual athletes, but there was a difference between their opinions of male homosexual athletes and the male students had more negative opinions of male athletes. Moreover, no significant differences were found between their answers to the question "If an athlete revealed that she/he was a homosexual, how would this confession affect opinions of fans of other sports branches?" but it was stated that fans would have negative opinions of this athlete. The findings obtained in this study show similarities to those obtained from a study carried out with 2,191 country-wide in the U.S. in 2002 and a great majority of the participants stated that they

would not change their opinions of a female and male athlete revealing that she/he was a homosexual (WC/HI, 2002; as cited in Saraç & Ebem Rahim, 2009).

In the section where the acceptability was questioned according to sports branches, a great majority of both the female and the male participants stated that they found homosexuality definitely unacceptable in the sports branches of football, wrestling, weight-lifting, and boxing. It was found that stereotypes and attitudes about gender roles were related to preconceived thoughts about homosexuals and individuals having strongly adopted traditional gender roles approached homosexuals with more negative attitudes (Sakalli, 2002a). Therefore, the reason for the low acceptance level observed in these sports branches might be the fact that these sports branches had long been accepted as a "male" sport and the participants had grown up in a society where traditional gender roles are attached great importance. In the sports branches of rugby, baseball, and basketball, homosexual athletes were more accepted and tolerated by the female participants than the male athletes.

When the data related to the statements considered appropriate for athletes revealing that they were homosexual were taken into consideration, it was found that the positive statements frequently used for homosexual athletes were "brave," "being herself/himself," and "honest," and the negative statements were "publicity-seeking," "wooly-minded," "sinful," and "unhappy." In a study carried out in the U.S., it was determined that the most frequently used positive statements were "honest," "being herself/himself," "brave," "heroic," and "objective," and the negative ones were "publicity-seeking," "unhappy," and "perverted" (WC/HI, 2002). Moreover, in a study made by Saraç and Ebem Rahim (2009), similar findings were found. At the same time, in Şah's (2012) study entitled "The Relationship of the Descriptions of Homosexuality, Bisexuality and Transsexuality With Levels of Homophobia and Acquaintanceship With LGBT People," it was determined that the people with low homophobia used such statements for homosexuals as "normal," "natural," and "tendency," but those with high homophobia used such statements as "illness," "deviancy," and "against the nature."

Although attitudes toward homosexuality and homosexuals are an important research subject which needs studying, there are very few studies in Turkey. Since especially homophobia in sport is a brand-new research subject, the number of studies is very limited. Comparison and supporting of the data obtained in this study with those obtained from general studies, but not with those obtained from studies made in the area of sport is one of the limitations of this study. Moreover, this study carried out with the participation of only physical education student teachers should also be repeated with other sample groups.

It is considered that establishing social relationships with homosexual people and increasing acquaintanceship with them will contribute to the perception of similarities and affect attitudes about this matter positively (Sakalli, 2002b; Çırakoğlu, 2006; Şah, 2012). By informing people about the fact that homosexuality is not an illness or perversion but simple a tendency, preconceptions about homosexual people can be decreased. Therefore, with the elimination of the obstacle at the starting point of establishing social relationships, acquaintanceship can be increased and homophobic situations can be removed.

Especially in teacher education, it will be useful to implement teacher training programs to develop attitudes and behaviors against discriminations in the society. Moreover, works to be carried out with the aim of increasing tolerance to different lifestyles in the society will help develop positive attitudes toward homosexuality.

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