



# Enabling Factors of Healthy Lesbian Identity in High Performance Coaches

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## Purpose:

The purpose of this study was to identify the enabling factors of healthy lesbian identities in high performance coaches. The literature suggested a need to understand what might facilitate or enable a healthy lesbian identity in the realm of elite sport coaching which often represents a sexist, heterosexist, and homophobic environment where lesbians are stigmatized and the social pressures of the gendered status quo are intensified (Griffin, 1998; Hall, 2002; Krane, 1996; Robinson, 2002). These disabling factors affect a woman's ability to develop a healthy lesbian identity. "When an individual is identified with a stigmatized group or social category, he or she also takes on the collectively shared negative evaluations associated with that group" (Brewer & Hewstone, 2004, p. 4). This statement asserts that homonegativity, homophobia, and heterosexism can inevitably lead to internalized homophobia which in essence is the opposite of a healthy lesbian identity (Krane, 1996). The significant distinction between this and other research endeavors is that this investigation will present an understanding of lesbian identity development from a solely lesbian point of view, rather than the generalized homosexual identity which is featured in the majority of other research.

## Methods:

A multifaceted qualitative methodology, phenomenological framework, and six information-rich cases were used to identify the factors that have contributed to the development of healthy lesbian identities in high performance coaches. The participants were selected via a criterion-based purposeful sampling method followed by snowball sampling. Their retrospective accounts were collected in semi-structured, 90 minute, in-depth interviews that utilized open-ended questions. The verbatim transcripts were then coded by the primary researchers and three external coders using descriptive and interpretative codes. The 120+ codes were then collapsed into the major themes that became apparent.

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### Time, Maturity, & Maintenance

"for me, a lot of the identity development process was just growing up and maturing and feeling better about myself as a human being"

### Social Support

Bring supported, accepted, & celebrated by:

- Family** - "having her as a role model [her mother] and seeing her hold her shoulders high no matter what she faced really impacted me"
- Friends** - "the turning point was because I had strong support from close friends... they were like... so, being lesbian was not the point for them, it was ok, it was so normal for them, and so banal"
- Partners** - "I think my partners have had a big influence on me because they were all increasingly more comfortable with their sexuality which led me to feel empowered by that"
- Lesbian & heterosexual role models** - "she was and is a strong and very confident woman and you can see that, if you can't see it then you're blind"

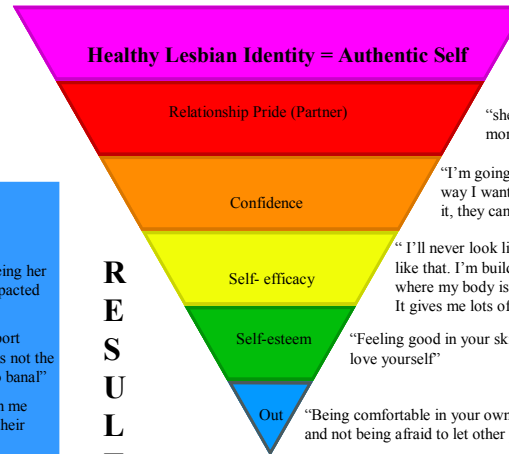
### Sport

Sport provided a venue through which participants experienced & developed:

- Self confidence** - "sport allowed me to really test the boundaries of who am I and what can I accomplish- it made me confident"
- Self efficacy** - "sport was a venue where my body was useful, powerful, and successful"
- Role models** - "I have had fantastic role models and it's been a great privilege in my life and almost all of them have come from sport"
- Partners** - "it seems so stupid to me to hide the fact [her relationship], we have just always been very open. We support each other, she comes to almost all of our league games"

### Employment Environment

- Being out with job security** - "My sexual orientation was a part of my job interview because I wanted to make it clear from the beginning"
- Support & acceptance by athletes & professional colleagues** - "my colleagues are as big defenders of my right to be a lesbian woman as I am and they would not tolerate a sexist comment. Not only would a sexist joke not be laughed at, but they'd be like 'what's your problem?' and 'don't make this place an unsafe place for Sarah, thank you very much'."
- Seeing other colleagues who are Out** - "Zoë, was a role model, big time, she really helped me professionally and in my personal life"



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## Discussion:

A healthy lesbian identity according to participants is a dynamic feature of themselves, of their authentic self. Self-confidence, self-efficacy, self-esteem, pride in their relationships, and being *Out* were the common features highlighted. Healthy lesbian identity development is a dynamic process that functions with respect to time, maturity, and in conjunction with the following three enabling factors:
 

- Social support** from a context outside of sport provided participants with support from friends, family, partners, and role models.
- Sport** provided a context where participants could develop self-confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and benefit from supportive interactions with athletes, colleagues, role models, and partners.
- Employment environment** was proactively negotiated because participants were *Out* during the job interview process. Consequently, producing a context where participants were supported and celebrated by colleagues, athletes, and partners within their field.

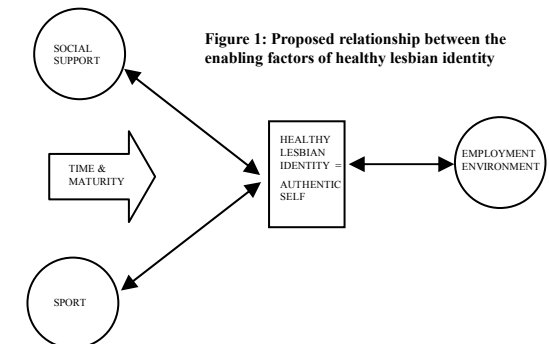


Figure 1: Proposed relationship between the enabling factors of healthy lesbian identity

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