“It Was My Story To Tell and I Wasn't Ready To Tell It. I Wanted To Just Continue and Referee”: Stigma Management Amongst LGBTQ+ Sport Officials

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Sport has historically been a space in which homophobia and transphobia run rampant, both for athletes and referees alike (Anderson, 2011; Moscowitz et al., 2019). Given the abuse sports officials receive during competitions (Webb & Hill, 2020), postgame (File, 2017; Pehkonen, 2019), in mass media (Borel-Hänni, 2015; Webb, 2018), and on social media (Wells, 2019), it is unsurprising that referees are leaving the profession at alarming rates.

Beyond the disrespect and abuse they receive as referees, previous research has noted that the intersection of referee identities with other marginalized identities may lead to even higher rates of dropout. Tingle and colleagues (2014) detailed that female referees experienced gendered stressors beyond those of their male counterparts while Schaeperkoetter (2017) found that perceptions of her officiating were influenced by her femaleness. Yet, match officials who have other marginalized identities remain an understudied population.

The purpose of the study was to provide: (a) a more nuanced understanding of the officiating profession; (b) a clearer sense of LGBTQ+ people’s experiences in sport; and, (c) an understanding of how to afford LGBTQ+ officials more career satisfaction and how they can be better retained.

Sixteen current and former officials from across North America who identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community participated in the study via semi-structured interviews. The authors independently coded and developed preliminary themes. As the codes were organized and refined, thematic analysis, operationally defined as “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79) was utilized. The resulting themes aligned with Clair et al.’s (2005) generalized model of invisible stigma management.

Within this framework, two strategic choices for those with invisible identities in the workplace exist: to pass (i.e., hide their invisible identity) or reveal (i.e., disclose their identity). To orient this research within the larger sociological frame, the model was adapted to adopt terminology that aligns with extant LGBTQ+ literature, including an emphasis on proposed additional antecedents to Clair et al.’s (2005) model: concern for next generation, socialization into community, lack of referee community, and timing of coming out.

The process of moving from passing to revealing one’s stigmatized identity typically occurred in one of two ways: 1) revealing regardless of persisting external pressures, or more commonly, 2) waiting until dissipating external pressures made it such that revealing one’s stigmatized identity was seen as a valued part of self-expression.

Similar to Ragins (2004), the referees in this study reported feeling othered and, at times, unwelcomed within officiating and sporting communities. Existing as outgroup members, the LGBTQ+ officials were acutely aware of their identity and the consequences associated with passing or revealing. When supported by an in-group member the door was opened for LGBTQ+ officials to reveal. The importance of allyship from in-group members for LGBTQ+ officials is underscored by their search for community. Further, the officials detailed the importance of an LGBTQ+ officiating sub-community where consequences and perceived fears are minimized and they can live authentically, as both LGBTQ+ and an official.