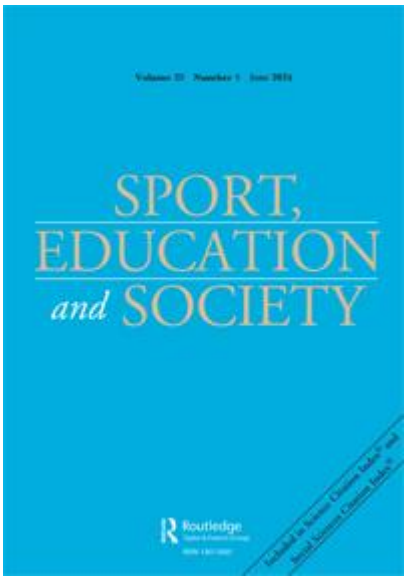

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Facing hegemonic masculine structures. Experiences of gay men studying physical activity and sport science in Spain

Anna Vilanova,[a]* Pau Mateu,[a] Javier Gil-Quintana,[b] Ingrid Hinojosa-Alcalde[a] and Ilse Hartmann-Tews[c]

[a] National Institute of Physical Education of Catalonia (INEFC), University of Barcelona (UB), Spain; [b]Facultat de Ciències de l'Activitat Física i l'Esport, Universitat de València, València, Spain; [c]Institut für Soziologie und Genderforschung, Deutsche Sporthochschule Köln, Köln, Germany

*Corresponding author: Pau Mateu, pmateu@protonmail.com

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Abstract

This research is the first to provide insights into the experiences of gay men studying a university degree in Physical Activity and Sport Science (PASS) in Spain. Drawing on Sue's theory of microaggressions and Bourdieu's categories explaining masculine domination, one to one semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 PASS students and ex-students that were subsequently studied through deductive-inductive thematic analysis. Our findings show the PASS context to be a heteronormative, masculinized and cisgender social field. Male homosexuality was almost invisible except when antigay language was used. Considering this environment, most of our interviewees chose to remain in the closet, which contributed to low levels of wellbeing and high levels of stress and anxiety. However, the few students that chose to come out experienced relief and felt included by some of their classmates and by staff. Some afterwards decided to be proactive and become role models so as to make visible and normalize homosexuality in the PASS and sports settings. Discussed are key aspects of the dominant culture in PASS faculties and the repercussions for the mental health and wellbeing of gay students. Our research also provides new insights into the nature and prevalence of microaggressions regarding sexual orientation that will help PASS and university management develop specific strategies and programmes to foster inclusivity.

Keywords: gay; higher education; sport science; symbolic violence, heteronormativity, hegemonic masculinity.

Introduction

In the last 15 years, Spain has been marked by important achievements in terms of social, political, and legislative recognition of gender identities and sexual diversity. Milestones include Law 13/2005, which allows people of the same sex to marry, Organic Law 1/2015, which amplifies definitions of attitudes and actions that could be considered hate crimes, and Catalan Law 11/2014, which establishes and regulates the right to equality and non-discrimination based on, among other factors, sexual orientation. Those are just some examples that represent normative advances towards a more egalitarian society.

On a social level, 91% of the Spanish population is in favour of the full recognition of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and other diverse forms of sexuality and gender (LGBTQIA+) rights (European Commission, 2019). This reality does not mean, however, that hostile attitudes towards these people have disappeared. In 2019 in Spain, hate crimes motivated by sexual orientation and gender identity increased by 8.6% to represent 16.3% of all hate crimes (Ministerio del Interior, 2020). Although increased legal protection of the LGBTQIA+ people may penalize more explicit manifestations of homophobia, it is also necessary to consider microaggressions, i.e., more subtle forms of violence that, even though relatively invisible, are potentially harmful to the wellbeing and self-esteem of sexual minorities (Sue, 2010). Microaggressions, together with other manifestations of harassment and violence, have a negative impact on the LGBTQIA+ people, as they cause emotional stress, anxiety and depression, self-esteem problems, and feelings of rejection, and ultimately limit the construction of a positive sexual identity (Halbrook et al., 2018; Juster et al., 2016).

Systematically questioning heteronormativity and gender stereotypes linked to

sexuality, i.e., developing actions and strategies aimed at subverting the doxa – of the socially naturalized state of affairs presented as a broad logical-moral consensus (Bourdieu, 1998a) – today poses a key challenge in social fields as important as higher education and sports (Amodeo et al., 2020; Dueñas et al., 2021; Gallardo-Nieto et al., 2021; Martínez-Guzmán & Íñiguez-Rueda, 2017; Piedra, 2015; Vilanova et al., 2018; Waling & Roffee, 2018). Thus, adopting a heterodox stance, our research explores the experiences of gay men in a space where both those issues converge: university degrees in Physical Activity and Sport Science (PASS).

Regarding the sports field, Braumüller et al. (2020), Griffin (2018), and Moscoso and Piedra (2019) criticize the fact that sport is still far from being universal and accessible for the LGBTQIA+ people. Griffin (1998) has written extensively on homophobia in sports and physical education, focusing on connections among heterosexism and sport, and documenting ongoing homophobic hostility. According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), hegemonic masculinity was described as "a pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue" (p. 832). These authors distinguished between hegemonic masculinity and other masculinities, which were usually subordinated. The sport setting has been historically a powerful cultural force in which hegemonic masculinity has been rooted (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). For instance, athletes who practice a non-hegemonic masculine sport (e.g., male cheerleaders, male synchronized swimmers) are presumed to be gay (Grindstaff, & West., 2011).

In Spanish universities, gay and lesbian sports participation is often explicitly rejected or is marked by the persistence of subtle homophobic attitudes and stigmas, manifesting as pejorative use of language and discriminatory comments and jokes

(Donoso et al., 2020; Piedra, 2015; Vilanova et al., 2018). Thus, although today sports spaces seem to have become more inclusive, and although the limits of what is considered acceptable behaviour for men have broadened considerably (Anderson et al., 2016; Channon & Matthews, 2015; Vilanova et al., 2018), sport continues, in general terms, to reproduce hegemonic masculinity norms and, therefore, to explicitly or implicitly exclude women and men who do not comply with sexual orientation/behaviours aligned with socially legitimized heteronormative standards (Dunning, 1986; Piedra, 2015; Sáenz-Macana & Devís-Devís, 2020). This situation leads to abandonment of sport, poor quality social relationships, negative emotions, and poor physical and mental health among the LGBTQIA+ people (Baiocco et al., 2018; Petty & Trussell, 2018).

LGBTQIA+ visibility is growing in the university environment, with higher education tending to be a critical setting in terms of inclusive attitudes towards these persons (Waling & Roffee, 2018). However, discriminatory and aggressive attitudes persist in higher education that are often subtle and difficult to detect (Amodeo, Esposito & Bacchini, 2020; Dueñas et al., 2021). At universities, the LGBTQIA+ people face a variety of homonegative practices – by heterosexual students and staff – through that range from non-verbal or gestural violence to name-calling, sexual harassment, and physical assault (Dueñas et al., 2021; Sabato, 2016; Tetreault et al., 2013). Against this backdrop, sexual minorities, including gay men, compared to their heterosexual peers, tend to have a more negative perception of the university climate as a hostile place (Woodford et al., 2015). While an important source of problems is implicit and explicit discrimination against gay students, another problem, as Gallardo-Nieto et al. (2021) point out, is the normalization and internalization of a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1998c), i.e., “the violence which extorts submission,

which is not perceived as such, based on ‘collective expectations’ or socially inculcated beliefs” (p. 103), because “the dominated perceive the dominant through the categories that the relation of domination has produced and which are thus identical to the interests of the dominant” (p. 121). The consequences of aggression against sexual minorities in the university environment include negative repercussions for the physical and mental health of LGBTQIA+ students, as evidenced by the fact that these students experience greater levels of depression, anxiety, and physical pain than other students (Ellis, 2009; Gallardo-Nieto et al., 2021; Woodford & Kulick, 2015). Many universities, in an attempt to remedy this situation, are investing important efforts in developing institutional programmes and initiatives aimed at enhancing LGBTQIA+ integration and wellbeing (Dueñas et al., 2021; Martínez-Guzmán & Íñiguez-Rueda, 2017; Waling & Roffee, 2018). However, as previously indicated, such initiatives may fail in detecting and taking action against more subtle forms of discrimination such as microaggressions.

Sexual orientation are often the basis of harassment and exclusion in sport (Gill, et al, 2010). Spanish PASS faculties, as environments linking education and sport, are highly masculinized. These institutions have traditionally tended to reinforce neoliberal discourses and gender stereotypes through, among others, a hidden curriculum that assumes male domination in the field of sport (Rodicio-García et al., 2020). Some signs related to this masculinization may be the fact that nearly 80% of students are men (Serra et al., 2019), or that most students are involved in competitive sport, mainly football (Rodicio-García et al., 2020). Although studies of the violence experienced by LGBTQIA+ individuals in higher education have been conducted in Spain and in Catalonia (Dueñas et al., 2021; Gallardo-Nieto et al., 2021), no research to date has analysed the experiences of gay men taking a specific degree. The PASS university

degree, given its particularities, represents an interesting setting for such a study.

Systematically questioning heteronormativity and gender stereotypes linked to sexuality, i.e., developing actions and strategies aimed at subverting the doxa – of the socially naturalized state of affairs presented as a broad logical-moral consensus (Bourdieu, 1998) – today poses a key challenge in social fields as important as higher education and sports (Amodeo, Esposito & Bacchini, 2020; Dueñas et al., 2021; Gallardo-Nieto et al., 2021; Martínez-Guzmán & Íñiguez-Rueda, 2017; Piedra, 2015; Vilanova, Soler & Anderson, 2020; Waling & Roffee, 2018). Thus, adopting a heterodox stance, the aim of this research was to explore the experiences of gay men in Spain taking a PASS university degree.

Theoretical framework

This article draws at a theoretical level on some of Pierre Bourdieu's concepts as it allows for a critical analysis of social inequalities and asymmetrical power relations.

One of the essential elements in Bourdieu's theory is the concept of field, a social space in which power struggles take place, which is historically constructed and partially autonomous, and which is characterised by specific rules and contested capitals (Bourdieu, 1993). The agents participating in each field confront each other with different means and objectives according to the position they occupy in the field, thus contributing to preserve or transform its structure (Bourdieu, 1998c).

The positions in the field are defined, to a large extent, by the volume and structure of the capitals that each agent possesses (or not). Bourdieu (1986) defines capitals as all those goods, concrete or symbolic, which are in dispute in a given field, thus endowing it with meaning. In this way, power in a field is based on the legitimisation and (dis)possession of certain capitals. Capitals can be presented in four

fundamental forms: (a) economic capital, money and property rights; (b) cultural capital, acquired knowledge and its embodied, institutionalised and/or objectified forms of demonstration and certification; (c) social capital, interpersonal connections and relationships; and (d) symbolic capital, belonging to any of the above and which, because of its particularities, is known and acknowledged, that is, valued with special interest in a specific field (Bourdieu, 1986, 1993).

The groups that possess more capital in a field, and therefore have more power, try to preserve those processes and forms of relationship that favour the reproduction of the social structure (Bourdieu, 2008). In other words, the privileged groups in each field are interested in the maintenance of the doxa, of "the point of view of the dominant, which presents and imposes itself as a universal point of view" (Bourdieu, 1998c, p.57). Doxa reinforces the reproduction of the social structure, its inequalities and its forms of domination. It exercises what Bourdieu calls symbolic power, a power of world-making (Bourdieu, 1989), a form of naturalised domination –i.e., recognised as legitimate by both the dominators and the dominated– which is oriented towards the reproduction of unequal social agreements. It is thus a power that makes use of symbolic violence, "the violence which extorts submission, which is not perceived as such" (Bourdieu, 1998c, p.103), because "the dominated perceive the dominant through the categories that the relation of domination has produced and which are thus identical to the interests of the dominant" (p. 121).

Being in possession (or not) of certain capitals is related to an agent's more or less privileged position in a field, and therefore to its greater or lesser symbolic power. In relation to this issue, the position occupied by an agent in the different social fields in which it participates, as well as his life experiences (both material and symbolic) have a significant influence on his habitus, a structuring, structured structure of enduring

dispositions that guide the practical action of each individual (Bourdieu, 1993; 1998a). The habitus conditions the agent's tastes, perceptions, habits and decisions throughout its life (Bourdieu, 1993), and can change over time.

Methods

The design of this critical study was framed within a qualitative paradigm as there was a need to gain an in-depth understanding of gay men experiences in a particular context (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The five authors of this paper, from different cultural frameworks and research positions, were faculty members with different levels of academic experience, white, from distinct generations, with different gender identities and sexual orientations. While recognising that the members of the research team's subjectivities might affect the research, discussions helped with research (re)design and data (re)structuring and (re)interpreting. In addition, the team's meetings and discussions helped to explore and reflect on all the members' own identities and positioning.

Participants

An initial set of research participants was recruited by criterion sampling (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), in person and over the internet (social media advertising and mailing lists) and was subsequently expanded by snowball sampling (Parker et al., 2019). Inclusion criteria were to be a gay man and to be a Spanish PASS degree student or ex-student. A total of 11 men meeting the selection criteria agreed to participate, with a mean (SD) age of 31.7 years (range, 26-50 years) at the time of data collection.

[Insert Table 1. Here]

Instruments

Data was collected through one to one semi-structured interviews, as this method generates a rich understanding of people's experiences and perceptions. It also contributes to a deeper understanding of experiences, given that participants can recount personal histories without constraints and in their own words (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Furthermore, as pointed out by Norman (2013), the recounting of personal experiences helps to uncover insights into the nature and impact of practices that legitimize social injustices and that may be perceived as "insignificant, trivial, or even invisible" (p. 1329). The main instrument used to stimulate contributions was a graphic elicitation tool known as a research diagram (Crilly et al., 2006). Based on the research objective and the concepts set out in the theoretical framework (field, habitus, etc.), the research team discussed and made a proposal for the general structure of the instrument. Two exploratory interviews were then conducted with two gay men who were former PASS students. They were shown the first instrument proposal and encouraged to expand it by including items they considered relevant. After incorporating the suggestions made by the participants of the exploratory interviews into the first proposal, a further meeting of the research team was held to discuss these contributions and synthesise it all into the final research diagram, which consisted of several boxes in three distinct areas. The upper box was divided into three introductory components: gay awareness, coming out, and the decision to study PASS. The larger middle area had a central box with a smaller box on each side: the left-hand box contained items linked to previous (but linked) experiences to PASS, such as physical education experiences in primary and secondary school contexts; the central box focused on PASS-related experiences, including (a) early experiences and adaptation, (b) day-to-day life in the faculty, (c) spaces and activities, and (d) life outside the faculty; and the right-hand box covered life after

PASS, focusing especially on job placement and personal life. Finally, the lower area included several components that could be related to any of the above-mentioned boxes, such as relevant socializing agents (family, friends, fellow students, etc), norms and institutional agents (protocols, support groups, instructor attitudes, etc), and feelings.

Procedure

Following the approval from the Ethics Committee of the Sport Administration of Catalonia, participants were first contacted to request participation and to explain the purpose of the research and the associated ethical issues. Participants were asked to read an informed consent document and to orally agree to participate. To ensure anonymity, participants were identified with pseudonyms. All interviews were conducted between January and April 2021. Given the public health situation resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, synchronous interviews were computer-mediated via Zoom. Before the interviews, participants were reminded of the study aims and were assured data confidentiality. Interviews, conducted in Spanish or Catalan and lasting an average of 84 minutes (range, 55-111 minutes), were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

We conducted a thematic analysis, considered the most suitable approach to explore and understand people's experiences (Braun et al., 2016). Data analysis was both deductive and inductive, and consisted of the following steps: (1) The authors familiarized themselves with the data by closely (re-)reading the transcripts. (2) The authors identified, using ATLAS.ti 8 qualitative data analysis software, initial categories based on Bourdieu's concepts showed in the theoretical framework section. (3) The authors deductively organized the data from the transcripts into the proposed categories. (4) The authors revisited the structured data and created new codes inductively on the basis of

both explicit information (participant verbalizations) and implicit information (silences, moments of doubt, insinuations, etc). (5) After (re-)reviewing and discussing the data and the relations among different bourdieusian concepts, the authors generated three main themes: (a) in/visibility: PASS faculties as heteronormative institutions (hegemonic masculinity); (b) experiences depending on the 'degree of outness'; and (c) becoming a role model. (6) The process concluded with the production of the research report.

Results and discussion

(In)visibility. PASS faculties as heteronormative institutions

PASS faculties are characterized by a large proportion of male students who manifest attitudes and traits traditionally associated with hegemonic masculinity, including emotional repression, competitiveness, domination, displays of strength and ability, and majority occupation of the public space (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Bourdieu, 1998a). A university degree which is related to sport tends reinforce these attributes and traits, strengthen heterosexuality and women[1] traditionally assigned roles (Baiocco et al., 2018; Levant & Kopecky, 1995; Palzkill, 1990). As pointed out by Donoso et al. (2020), PASS faculties tend to be spaces where heterosexism is dominant and where a certain normalization coexists with hostility towards sexual diversity:

> Jorge: The university, as far as the LGBT issue goes, is usually assumed to be a very comfortable space. […] At PASS this isn't the case […] it's a macho environment. (You see it) in the comments, in sports, in what is expected of you.

[1] This category includes men who, regardless of their sexual orientation, externalize their gender expression as female or effeminate.

Dafnis: With the sport a lot of people didn't know that I'm gay. And a lot of the usual comments were 'you're a faggot'. It's a very strong masculinity. In sport, it's all about this macho attitude, you need to be strong, talk about girls…

The previous quotes exposes how the doxa of the field that is PASS imposes a heteronormative common sense and a establishes a hegemony of the most traditional and exclusionary masculinities. The doxa of PASS conditions the habitus of students, both homosexual and heterosexual, orienting them towards the performance of orthodox actions (e.g., comments, bodily attitudes) that tend to preserve and reproduce the logic of the field (Bourdieu, 1993; 1998c, 2008). In other words, this particular doxa contributes to (and is sustained by) seemingly subtle forms of hostility, such as microaggressions (Sue, 2010) reflected in homonegative and homophobic comments and jokes. Microaggressions are therefore acts of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1998a; 1998c) in that they are internalized and normalized by heterosexual students and by gay students themselves, with all feeling pressures to fulfil the gender roles socially attributed to them:

> Daniel: All the people I've heard homophobic comments from, and I include myself, are absolutely pro-gay. It was more of a matter of wanting to fit in. (Whether it affects you) depends on how thin-skinned you are. Being called a 'fag' didn't affect me. The word itself has no connotations, after all, it is within the culture.

The above quote highlights how symbolic violence is no less than the incorporation of specific social perspectives and divisions among agents, configuring, through recognition and misrecognition mechanisms, a sociocultural arbitrariness that crystallizes in specific mental schemes (i.e., their habitus) and practices (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Note that Daniel's apparent indifference to the normalization of derogatory language that suggests that being homosexual is 'something negative' was not generalized; several of our interviewees felt deeply affected by negative language

directed at the gay people, whether or not intended to be malicious: “The word 'faggot' was always there. And every time you hear that word, even if they don't say it to you, it creates an internal tension” (Pol). In this sense, it is important to consider that the specific doxa of a field may affect each agent differently, insofar as their positions in the field (conditioned by their (dis)possession of capital) and their habitus (configured from their position in the field, previous experiences and exposure to educational, media, family, religious institutions) can be different (Bourdieu, 1993, 1998a, 1998c). Therefore, it makes sense that perceptions and practices may be different among gay men studying a degree in PASS.

As for fellow students, most of the interviewed gay men preferred to befriend women: “With the men, I had nothing in common [...] I saw them as very ‘macho’. […] I didn’t like their ways, I didn’t like the chauvinism, I felt more included with women” (Blai). This behaviour was common in interviewees whose gender expression was very different from the dominant masculine canons. As manifesting a gender expression linked to the standards of hegemonic masculinity represents an important symbolic capital in the field of PASS, not expressing a valued and recognised bodily hexis may be related to occupying a position far from the most privileged agents (i.e., heterosexual men who manifest those attributes linked to hegemonic masculinity), so it may make sense to seek association with other disadvantaged groups in the field such as women. However, several of the interviewees, wanting to keep their sexual orientation hidden, felt that becoming part of a group of women friends at university would mark them out more as homosexual, thus losing their symbolic capital. In this regard, with the aim of maintaining or even improving their position in the field of PASS, some interviewees preferred not only to deliberately participate in groups of male friends, but also to

participate in homohysterical behaviours such as public use of homophobic and heterosexist language (Anderson, 2016; Sue, 2010):

> Marcel: If you hang out with women, if you have more female than male friends … or if you don't make the typical comments that people (men) make about 'ugga-ugga'[2] or other moronic comments ... If you don't participate in this 'normality', what's likely to happen is that someone will end up saying 'he's a fag'. And that's the fear you have.

The stress levels felt by interviewees were not the same in all university spaces. While face-to-face classes in classrooms were not particularly uncomfortable, perceived pressure was greater in other locations: "I generally felt comfortable, except in the changing rooms. So that nobody could think strange things […] I preferred to shower at home because of what they might think" (Joaquín_10). In addition, Diego said they [heterosexual students] mainly make jokes about girls and he couldn't be part of the discussions and give his opinions. Also Jorge explained "you must make sure that the others do not think that you are looking at people, that you want to take advantage of the situation" (Jorge) as changing rooms are perceived as homoerotic places (Carless, 2012) filled with restrictions (Landi, 2019). As pointed by McGlashan (2013), locker rooms were traumatic places where gay students remembered harassment, discomfort, and homophobia. By contrast Josep, with a non-normative gender expression and completely out since the beginning of their studies, explained: "I went to the locker room that I wanted. Sometimes I showered with the boys, sometimes I showered with the girls. No problem at all".

Some of our interviewees referred to feeling uneasy during practical activities involving possible bodily contact with teammates. Given that corporality and physical contact are a core element of PASS studies, hegemonic masculinity is particularly

[2] This onomatopoeic sound reflects the grunt of a primitive caveman or gorilla, associated with a person considered to be chauvinistic or ignorant.

overrepresented, while microaggressions towards gay people are common. Some of the interviewees normalized, and even considered legitimate (Bourdieu, 1997), certain irrational apprehensions towards them as gay men, such as the avoidance of physical contact (Sue, 2010). Indeed, the gay men's attitudes to certain practices such as showing up in changing rooms or physical contact with male teammates are influenced by their habitus (Bourdieu, 1998a), shaped by how they perceive (and therefore react) to their social experiences. And those practices that legitimise the doxa as a consequence of symbolic violence only reinforce and reproduce the logic and structure of the field.

In their perceptions of PASS faculties as an unwelcoming environment in terms of sexual orientation, an important issue for the interviewees was the minimal presence of LGBTQIA+ themes in the curriculum:

> Roberto: (At the faculty) there is no mention of LGBTQIA+ issues, and to be honest this surprises me. […] It is a topic that is not discussed, I do not hear about it anywhere. Not in and not outside the university. I think it's a subject that remains a bit in limbo.

The educational environment is an important element for the (re)configuration of the habitus (Bourdieu, 1993; 1998a), as is the sporting environment in the case of the interviewees. If homosexuality is invisibilised and/or perceived as negative in spaces such as PASS faculties, gay male students may prefer to hide their sexual orientation. However, prejudices and microaggressions towards the homosexual population are not exclusive to the PASS faculties, as fields are partially autonomous (Bourdieu, 1993): "You already come from home with prejudices. You don't turn up at university and say 'oh, here's something strange'. You arrive with prior information" (Jorge). Thus, displays of hostility towards the gay people are merely expressions of a general doxa which has a particularly favourable context in PASS faculties for its preservation, in that certain orthodox processes reproduce social structures and relations, e.g., the predominance of specific attributes associated with 'the masculine' over those related to

'the feminine', the exaltation of certain forms and uses of the body, etc (Bourdieu, 2008).

Experiences according to degree of outness

Coming out is a complex and multidimensional process, variable and lacking linear or hierarchical progression (Petty & Trussell, 2018). During their PASS studies, the interviewees reported deciding on varying degrees of outness that varied over the duration of the degree: fully out, selectively out, and remaining closeted (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009). The interviewees thus revealed that experiences in the PASS faculty differed according to the degree of outness, with four main narratives identified as follows: (1) being the only gay, (2) living a double life, (3) don't ask/don't tell, and (4) relief.

Only one of the interviewees was completely out, and he described the experience in PASS positively: "There were no weird rumours. With friends (classmates) I was doing really well, we were partying ... it was the typical college life, and (I was) very happy to study sports" (Josep). However, during the interview, he made reference to a friend with whom he was working on projects wanted to stop doing so, due to comments from colleagues along the lines of: "Eh, look out, lately you've been hanging around with the gay of the class…" (Josep), This interviewee had come out a few years before entering the PASS faculty. Despite initial fears and preconceptions, his positive experience of the process and the normalization of his gay status, by family and friends and in educational and sports settings, made him more predisposed to openly revealing his sexual orientation; in short, his habitus was transformed (Bourdieu, 1998a). However, this interviewee recalled also feeling isolated; he, as the only openly gay man, was the 'course homosexual'. Thus, the low visibility of

the LGBTQIA+ people in PASS faculties seems to reinforce perceptions of social and emotional isolation and feelings of loneliness among gay men who are open about their sexual orientation (Sue, 2010). This was also the feeling of an interviewee who came out in the third year of the PASS degree: “I was like the laboratory rat. This is something I regretted, not to feel like any other bloke [...] at the public level, (I) was the only gay.”

Some interviewees chose to remain in the closet throughout the entire PASS degree. Bilimoria & Stewart (2009) point out that a common choice of many LGBT people is not to make public their sexual orientation; this is because they want or need to manage the associated stigma or even fear being the target of violence to some degree. By remaining in the closet, the interviewees were exercising an orthodox act of submission to symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1998c). People who try to keep their homosexuality secret often do so for fear of the reactions of others and of being judged:

> Diego: We are all afraid of something, of not being accepted, of not being liked by people... Or that people may not look at you the same – course coordinators, bosses, everyone, anyone. Because in the end, it’s what you anticipate [...]. I have a (gay) friend who was out walking with another bloke, and some individuals got out of a car and beat them up. [...] Or people’s friends practically stop talking to them.

This kind of situation led to the need to juggle a hidden and private homosexual life with a seemingly heterosexual public life adapted to a doxa aligned with the standards of hegemonic masculinity: “I behaved absolutely as heterosexual, and that is what I wanted to make others see” (Blai). They thus lived a ‘double life’, ‘wore a mask’, or ‘created an alter ego’. Strategies to maintain or even gain social and symbolic capital through heterosexual and masculine public appearance included emotional/loving relationships with women, including displays of affection in the presence of colleagues, making friends with groups of men, choosing traditionally male

sports, and making homophobic jokes:

> Marcel: I was dating a college girl, just to project the image that I wasn't gay, because people sensed it. For the same reason I necked with a girl in a nightclub at a faculty party.

These practices of hegemonic masculinity can be interpreted as actions resulting from a habitus (Bourdieu, 1998a) shaped by previous social experiences and interactions that foster self-repression and even hostility to one's own status as a gay person. Such actions, however, contribute to the reproduction of the homonegative and heterosexist doxa. The consequences for the wellbeing and health of the interviewees were considerable:

> Daniel: I was going to jump (commit suicide). I was very depressed [...]. I lost 10 kilos, I couldn't eat. Everything I ate I vomited up again. I was anxious and nervous ... I was isolated from the worlds of my family, my lifelong friends, and my university friends.

Findings in previous studies carried out in Catalan universities (Dueñas et al., 2021; Gallardo-Nieto et al., 2021) are thus corroborated. Frost and Meyer (2009) also point to a link between internalized homophobia and the onset of depression-related symptoms, while Sue (2010) reports that LGBT youth tend to have suicidal thoughts more often than heterosexual youth, and that negativity towards this people undermines their self-esteem, depletes their physical energy, and negatively affects their sense of wellbeing. Participants' stories tend to show that homophobia persists in PASS contexts, and that their wellbeing was negatively affected (suicidal ideation).

Some of our interviewees decided that they would not explicitly announce that they were gay, but neither would they hide their gay status if the topic came up spontaneously. This 'semi outness', whereby the homosexual man reveals himself to a certain group of people.

> Dafnis: I thought so then, and I think so today: maybe what I was doing was hiding it, but it's just that a heterosexual person doesn't come up to you and say 'hello, I'm John and I'm heterosexual'! I was thinking 'why should I have to give explanations? Why should I have to go through life saying I'm Dafnis and I'm gay?' [...] So you just avoid the subject, you postpone it (revealing yourself as gay publicly) in some situations ... and in other situations you behave normally, because the people you trust already know.

Some participants chose selective exposure of their homosexuality on sensing a 'don't ask/don't tell' atmosphere in PASS faculties, similar to that described by Bilimoria & Stewart (2009) for a science and engineering faculty:

> Roberto: Sometimes I control myself a little. With my circle of (gay) friends, the language is different, a little more liberal, so to speak. But with them (PASS colleagues) no, I don't do that. Not out of fear… maybe it's a question of being careful. In the gay world there are things that heterosexuals fail to understand, that might scare them. And here (at the PASS faculty) the gay issue is a bit taboo.

This perception of a climate of LGBTQIA+ invisibility concerned not only classmates and academics, but also, corroborating previous research (Alessi et al., 2017; Gallardo-Nieto et al., 2021), reached to the academic and institutional levels:

> Jorge: I wish I had experienced that, but it wasn't like that. Including this topic in the curriculum would make it visible, provide a reference. It would make you see that you are not an alien, that there are people who are like you and are happy, and that it is a perfectly valid life choice.

When the interviewees came out of the closet, the social support of family, friends, and university and sports peers was felt to be crucial for their wellbeing (Petty & Trussell, 2018). In this sense, experiences were mostly positive:

> Pol: My flatmate made me end up saying it. And when I saw that his reaction was completely normal, I was empowered and told more friends. And great... my college friends used to say to me, 'Hey, we can see you're happy now!' I felt very supported.

When you take the step, you realize it's not so bad.

The interviewee's perception was one of relief, and a wish that he had revealed his sexual orientation earlier, as was reported by Vilanova et al. (2018).

The existence of a homonegative doxa that is constantly reinforced through both manifest and symbolic violence leads to the formation of a collective habitus (Bourdieu, 2008), such that, despite differences at the individual level, the anticipation of coming out is a more fearful experience than it in fact turns out to be.

Previous studies (Gallardo-Nieto et al., 2021; Woodford & Kulick, 2015) report that the university qualifications of LGBTQIA+ people are lower than those of heterosexual and cisgender students. Some of our interviewees felt that the impact on their academic and athletic performance was positive after they came out. Ultimately, gay PASS students who decided to make their sexual orientation public went from feeling afraid to feeling liberated. Once out of the closet, they felt accepted in the university environment, and also found that their physical and mental health was better than when they kept their homosexuality secret. However, at least in PASS faculties, acceptance and visibility are not synonymous: "It's accepted but it's not discussed. Homosexuality is not considered a problem, but this does not mean we are as warmly welcomed as in other spaces" (Jorge). Despite coming out, the invisibility (or minimal visibility) generated by institutions and social groups continues to play an important role in the experiences of homosexual people (Sue, 2010).

Becoming a role model

A few years after finishing higher education, two of the interviewees decided to take a further step in terms of their public visibility, by becoming role models for gay people in sports in general, and for gay PASS students in particular. Several studies (Francisco,

González-de-Garay & Moliner, 2020; Vizcaíno-Verdú et al., 2020) report the historical scarcity of LGBTQIA+ role models, while those role models that do exist reflect typical clichés associated with the collective, in addition to having lived little understood and unhappy lives.

> Marcel: I've become very aware of how important it is to be a role model [...] And there are no gay role models, or the ones there are respond to a very specific stereotype with which I do not identify.

The gay man just cited met with a PASS teacher (the first author of this article), to whom he had come out at university, to inform him that he was ready to act as the role model that he himself lacked. His experience was reported in numerous media, including several of the most important radio and television channels in Spain:

> Marcel: Being a role model makes you realize the road that still has to be travelled. I make this as visible as possible and I work a lot with the media, in debates, conferences, classes… [...] I want to help change the university and the sports worlds.

Another interviewee who decided to become a role model is currently an academic employed by a PASS faculty:

> Jorge: It was difficult, because I had never considered becoming so visible [...]. But a point came when I thought 'I need to be visible, to be a point of reference' [...]. And it's great that students can see that we exist. [...] It's important for them to be aware that the possibility (of being openly gay in the sports world) exists, and that it's not bad, that it's no big deal.

Homosexual role models, who, according to Bourdieu (1998b), often have considerable cultural capital, play a key role in the heterodox task of the symbolic subversion necessary for social progress. Role models also enhance the wellbeing of vulnerable groups (Galdona, 2000). For both the interviewees who became role models, this was important in transmitting a positive view of the LGBTQIA+ movement, and in

demonstrating homosexuality to be a legitimate sexual orientation within a diverse society (Morillo, 2020), in sports in general, and in PASS studies in particular. Bourdieu (1998b), however, warned that symbolic subversion, while transforming common sense (understood as the arbitrary perceived as natural), is not enough. In other words, the presence of role models needs to be accompanied by power disputes in key social fields and institutions.

Conclusions

Our study is the first exploration of the experiences of gay men taking a PASS university degree in Spain. In this contribution in the form of a detailed description of the experiences of gay PASS students and ex-students to the fields of sport and education, we report three novel insights regarding sexual orientation and PASS studies.

The first insight has to do with the sports culture in PASS faculties. Our findings point to a culture driven by the principles of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity (as far as men are concerned). Male homosexuality is invisible and is largely dealt as a taboo subject. These findings are consistent with those of Braumüller et al. (2020), who identified these issues as important determinants of LGBT discrimination in sport, with pejorative use of language as the most common form of discrimination (Sue, 2010). Our findings contrast with the suggestion, by Vilanova, Soler and Anderson (2020), that, regarding inclusivity, while the sports environment acts as a barrier, the university acts as a facilitator. The PASS degree, however, cannot be considered a facilitator, unlike other degrees such as communication sciences. This is because the sports context reinforces hegemonic masculinity and is, ultimately, considered a male preserve (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

The second insight concerns outness in relation to wellbeing, as we found that

the experiences of the interviewees were highly influenced by their degree of outness. According to Bourdieu (2008), the degree of outness depends on previous positive or negative social experiences, which clearly affected the perceptions of the experiences of our PASS interviewees. A particular environment cannot be analysed or taken into account without considering the different spheres of a person's life. Most of the interviewees referred to the importance of conforming elements that made up their habitus, such as the family environment or school physical education and sports-related experiences. Participants in this study who keep their homosexuality secret have poor levels of wellbeing, poorer academic and sports performance, high levels of stress and anxiety, and even experience suicidal thoughts, while those who live their homosexuality partially or completely openly have a better quality of life, with high levels of self-esteem and healthier social relationships. Differences regarding age were not found.

The final insight concerns role models. The invisibility of the LGBTQIA+ group in both PASS studies and in sports in general reflects the lack of role models who normalize the existence of homosexual people in these spheres. Visible role models undermine stereotyping and demonstrate to future students that another reality is possible in PASS degrees.

Due to the peculiarities of the social field studied, i.e., sports, our research focused exclusively on gay men within the LGBTQIA+ community. This choice is consistent with the position adopted by Hartmann-Tews et al. (2020), namely, that it is necessary to fold up the LGBTQIA+ umbrella, given that different groups face their own specific challenges. Future research, therefore, should focus on other groups such as lesbian women or transgender people.

Given the difficulty in locating participants who wanted to contribute to this study, we included people from different generations. Our findings suggest that, despite the progressive opening of society and university faculties to homosexual people, a homonegative culture persists in the field of sport, with all its consequences for gay sportspeople. Future lines of research in PASS faculties could focus on key agents such as academic, administrative, and services staff, etc. It would also be interesting to evaluate and, where appropriate, provide feedback on the effectiveness of strategies and actions developed by universities in order to be (or, perhaps, simply show themselves to be) more inclusive in relation to sexual diversity and gender expression.

Our findings suggest a need to establish a welcoming organizational culture and inclusive structures and polices within PASS faculties. The inclusion of LGBTQIA+ themes on PASS websites and in PASS campuses, the celebration of days of symbolic relevance (pride day, day against LGBTQIA+-phobia in sport), the facilitation of spaces for student associations, and the promotion of research that addresses LGBTQIA+ issues are just some examples. Awareness also needs to be raised regarding the importance of using sensitive language in the PASS context, and the provision of LGBTQIA+ training for both staff and students.

Ethics statement

This study was performed in compliance with the Declaration of Helsinki and was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee for Clinical Research of the Catalan Sports Council (023/CEICGC/2021).

Author contributions

AV, PM: study design. AV, PM and JGQ: data collection. AV, PM: data analysis and interpretation. JGQ, IHA and IHT: critical friends. AV, PM, JGQ, IHA and IHT:

manuscript preparation. AV: conceptualization and funding procurement. All authors significantly contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Declaration of interest statement

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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