

1 **Examining the experiences of the first openly gay male team sport athlete in
2 Spain**

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5 **Abstract**

6 Spanish sports literature is devoid of studies investigating the voices of gay athletes.
7 Using semi-structured interviews, the purpose of this research was to examine the
8 contextually relevant experiences of the first-ever openly gay elite athlete in a Spanish
9 team sport context. Our investigation covers multiple personal and institutional layers
10 of the sporting complex, and are analysed in three ways 1) using Troiden's (1989)
11 notions of identity; 2) using Anderson's (2009) Inclusive Masculinity Theory; and 3)
12 McCormack's (2011) theory of gay discourse. Our findings reveal that coming out
13 was a more positive experience than the athlete had expected. He experienced
14 inclusivity from his teammates, trainers, managers and supporters. There was no
15 physical aggression and verbal harassment. He did, however, frequently hear antigay
16 language spoken, which he reported as not being homophobic. Our findings provided
17 one of the few examinations of this topic outside of the United States.

18 **Key words**

19 Coming out, gay, sport, homosexuality, homophobia, Victor Gutiérrez

20

21 There is little empirical data on the experiences of closeted gay male athletes
22 throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Hekma, 1998; Pronger, 1990) and no research on the

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1 experiences of openly gay men in sport. The lack of public visibility of gay men in
2 sport, combined with research on the attitudinal disposition of heterosexual men,
3 largely led sport scholars to agree that competitive team sports were normally
4 characterized as highly heteronormative and homophobic organizational cultures
5 (Anderson, 2005). In the global west, this was because competitive sport served as a
6 social institution principally organized around a political project, whereby certain
7 forms of masculinity were deemed acceptable, while other forms of masculinity were
8 denigrated (Crosset, 1990). Sports of this time strongly associated boys and men with
9 masculine dominance by constructing their identities and their physiques in alignment
10 with hegemonic perspectives on masculine embodiment and expression (Connell,
11 1995). That is to say, sports throughout the 1980s and 1990s maintained strong
12 institutional cultures in which hegemonic masculinity was produced and defined: an
13 athlete was thought to represent the ideal of what it means to be a man, an ideal that
14 ran counter to what was considered feminine and/or gay (Connell, 1995).

15 However, cultural homophobia has decreased in recent years in most western
16 countries, and this has seriously impacted the relationship between gay men and sport
17 (McCormack and Anderson, 2014a). Anderson (2002) conducted the first research on
18 openly gay male high school and collegiate athletes, finding that the coming out
19 experiences of the 26 openly gay athletes he interviewed were much more positive
20 than either he or his participants expected. Gay male athletes at high school and
21 university level were surprised at the inclusivity they experienced from their
22 teammates. In a replicate study some years later, Anderson (2011a) found that openly
23 gay male athletes from the same demographic—using the same recruitment
24 procedure—were not only much easier to locate, but had also seen an improvement in
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1 their situation. They were overwhelmingly accepted by their mostly heterosexual
2 teammates. In their latest research on the topic, Anderson, Magrath and Bullingham
3 (2016) suggest that gay men are readily accepted, almost exclusively and without
4 reservation, across the west. Increasing acceptance of gays and lesbians has also been
5 reported by other scholars when examining stakeholders within sport (Cashmore and
6 Cleland, 2011; Fink et al., 2012).

7 For example, in recent years, research conducted predominantly in the UK and
8 USA show that athletes are less afraid to state their sexual orientation (Anderson
9 2011a; Anderson and Bullingham, 2015), that coaches better manage the presence of
10 gays and lesbians on their teams (Oswalt and Vargas, 2013) and that supporters, mass
11 media and fans on social media show more respect and tolerance towards gay athletes
12 (Cashmore and Cleland, 2012; Cleland, 2014a, 2014b; Gough, 2008; Kian, Anderson
13 and Shipka, 2015; Nylund, 2014) than previously found. Similarly, homosexually
14 themed language that may have previously been regarded as a pejorative with intent
15 to cause harm to sexual minorities, is now most often used as non-pejorative
16 (McCormack, 2011).

17 A trend of growing acceptance of homosexuality along with increased legal
18 protections, including marriage, have encouraged scholars to not only re-examine the
19 relationship between gay men and sports in the west, but also to revisit theories
20 surrounding the sports and masculinity interplay. It was this precisely this loss of
21 homophobia as a requisite ingredient of hegemonic masculinity that led Anderson
22 (2009) to develop Inclusive Masculinity Theory. Anderson's treatise situates
23 masculinity in an historical context and uses homohysteria to conceptualise the

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1 relationship between masculinity and homophobia in varying cultural and temporal
2 contexts.

3 Defining “homohysteria” as the fear men have of being socially perceived as
4 gay (Anderson, 2011b), Anderson argues that in periods of high homohysteria, boys
5 and men are compelled to (a) express homophobic and sexist attitudes, (b) raise their
6 masculine capital through sport and muscularity (c) raise their heterosexual capital
7 through sexually objectifying women, and (d) avoid emotional intimacy or
8 homosocial tactility. All of this is to escape the stigma of being considered gay
9 (Anderson, 2008).

10 Thus, in times of high homohysteria, masculinity is predicted to exist in a
11 hierachal capacity, with the form of masculinity most associated with heterosexuality
12 at the top, and all others stratified below. In this zeitgeist, masculinities most
13 associated with femininity or homosexuality will be marginalized in a process that
14 Connell (1995) defines as hegemonic masculinity.

15 However, inclusive masculinity theory maintains that as homohysteria
16 declines, multiple masculinities may be equally esteemed (Anderson, 2005). Not only
17 will multiple masculinities co-exist harmoniously, but fewer behaviours are
18 associated with homosexuality. In inclusive settings (with low homohysteria),
19 heterosexual boys and men are permitted to engage in an increasing range of
20 behaviours without threat to their publicly perceived heterosexual identities
21 (Anderson, Adams, and Rivers, 2012; McCormack and Anderson 2014a, 2014b).
22 Thus, inclusive masculinity theory is an adaptable heuristic tool, and it is able to
23 explain the social dynamics of masculinities in times of low homohysteria.

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1 **Inclusive Masculinity in the Spanish Context**

2 Many countries have experienced social changes as a result of new legislation,
3 public awareness campaigns, and the presence of more openly gay citizens, including
4 athletes. In 2005, Spain became the 3rd country to legalise same-sex marriages. In
5 addition, same-sex couples were also granted maternity or paternity rights at this time.
6 According to Cortina (2016), public tolerance of homosexuality has substantially
7 increased in Spain over the last few decades.

8 However, these gains have not been free from political controversy, stirred up
9 by ideological traditionalists and the Catholic Church (Montalbán et al., 2014). As
10 Martinez (2010) points out, homosexuality in Spain went through a long and
11 painstaking process of normalization, following a path of “naturalization” and
12 habituation to the point that legislation finally became feasible.

13 This, combined with a small number of openly gay or lesbian people in top-
14 flight Spanish sport, raises the question of whether it is just as easy, or still more
15 difficult for Spanish athletes to come out than athletes in the Anglophilic world. The
16 sheer lack of openly gay people, naturally makes this a difficult object for empirical
17 study. It is for this reason that Piedra et al. (2017) approached the subject by
18 interviewing heterosexuals.

19 In order to examine this, they created an instrument to facilitate the
20 measurement of two dimensions of tolerance towards non-heteronormative sexualities
21 in sport: non-rejection and acceptance, comparing the UK to Spain. Results point to
22 three metacognitive profiles related to tolerance: low, high, and partial. Their findings
23 show high levels of both dimensions of tolerance in the UK, and higher percentages

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1 of partial tolerance in Spain, underlining the importance of cultural contexts and
2 policies in affecting people's levels of tolerance.

3 This is slightly at odds with the population as a whole. PEW research suggests
4 that Spain is the most accepting country of homosexuality, with 88% public approval
5 (Pew Research Centre, 2014). To this end, sports-directed laws and awareness
6 campaigns have also been implemented in Spain. Although Spanish legislation
7 (19/2007) against violence, racism, xenophobia and intolerance in sports does not
8 explicitly mention homophobia, it does highlight the prohibition of "singing songs or
9 exhibiting humiliating and intimidating messages against any person based on their
10 race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation".

11 However, as we develop further in this paper, it is rare for athletes to declare
12 their sexuality openly in public, thus contributing to the image of homosexuality as a
13 taboo subject in sport. Consequently, while gay men are increasingly visible in some
14 spheres of society, sport remains an arena where few 'out' gay males are seen. Thus,
15 in comparison to other leisure activities, sport offers few role models for young same-
16 sex attracted males (Elling and Janssens, 2009). Furthermore, Piedra et al.'s 2014
17 study, together with others undertaken in the Spanish PETE context (Pérez-
18 Samaniego et al. 2014), suggest sport takes place in a context still deeply rooted in the
19 heteronormative gender order, where homophobic attitudes still exist.

20 Spanish sports literature is bereft of studies investigating the voices of
21 homosexual athletes. This research therefore seeks to fill this void. We do this by
22 interviewing the first openly gay male elite athlete within a team sport in Spain.

23 **Method**

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1 A case study was designed to examine the particularity of a single case. At the
2 time of writing this study, only three Spanish elite athletes had publicly recognised
3 their homosexuality, and two of them were from individual sports. That is still the
4 case today. These were Kike Sarasola, a jockey now retired, and Javier Raya, a figure
5 skater who does not currently reside in Spain. For the purposes of this study, we
6 recruited Victor Gutiérrez, the first elite athlete to play in a sports team in Spain to
7 openly come out as homosexual.

8 Victor is 25 years old and lives in Madrid. He is a professional water polo player in
9 Canoe, one of the most important water polo clubs in Spain. He also plays for the
10 Spanish national team. He has a degree in Journalism and Communication. Of
11 significance to this research, decided to publicly come out in 2016 via an interview with
12 the website [Shangay.com](#). Since 1993, Shangay has been the leading source of Spanish
13 news, sport and culture for the LGBTI community. After the Shangay article, Gutiérrez
14 appeared on mainstream Spanish news and sport channels. Victor has since become an
15 activist for the LGBTI community, appearing in several events and speaking with the
16 media.

17

18 *Procedures*

19 It was decided that an in depth interview would be the most appropriate means
20 of arriving at a clear understanding of the respondent's experiences as an openly gay
21 man in elite sport in Spain. Therefore we followed a semi-structured interview format
22 based on Anderson's research (2011a). The interview began by asking Victor how he
23 became involved in sport and when he first realised he was gay. Questions then

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1 progressed onto issues surrounding coming out to teammates and coaches, and a
2 number of questions about his lived experiences as an openly gay athlete.

3 After achieving institutional ethical approval, and six months after Victor first
4 came out, the first author conducted an in-depth, face to face interview at the
5 participant's chosen location. We began by building trust and rapport with him via one
6 of his water polo colleagues. Secondly, we made ourselves "credible" by introducing
7 ourselves as researchers from our well-known university, and sharing some of our
8 previous research on gender and homosexuality in sport with him.

9 The purpose and the format of the interview were explained clearly, assuring
10 the participant that his confidentiality would be maintained. However, he refused to
11 be anonymous, commenting: "I don't know what are you going to ask me, but I'm out
12 to help others, to break a taboo within the sport and to make it visible. So I am happy
13 for you to identify who I am". Respecting Victor's wishes, no pseudonym has
14 therefore been used in the reporting of our findings. The participant was also
15 instructed that he could withdraw from the interview at any time, and he was not
16 obliged to respond to all the questions. Informed consent was obtained from the
17 respondent before the study began.

18 The interview lasted an hour. It was first recorded and then transcribed
19 verbatim. The transcript was sent to the participant so that he could check it for
20 accuracy. He agreed that the transcribed data reflected his experiences, and he did not
21 make any changes.

22 *Data analyses*

1 Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. This analysis organizes
2 and describes data in rich detail (Sparkes and Smith, 2014). In order to conduct the
3 thematic analysis, we followed six steps (1. Familiarization with the data; 2.
4 Generating the initial codes based on the purpose of the study; 3. Grouping the codes
5 in main themes; 4. Reviewing of the themes; 5. Defining and naming the themes; and
6 6. Producing the report). Software Atlas.ti 7 was used to organize data codification
7 and interview analyses. Descriptive validity was ensured by recording the interview,
8 transcribing verbatim, and by involving other researchers to proofread the transcripts.
9 This method also guaranteed theoretical validity, as the first two authors met and
10 discussed the categorization of each code in relation to the theoretical framework. The
11 interview was conducted in Spanish and translated into English.

12 **Results**

13 *Genesis of an Openly Gay Athlete*

14 Victor's awareness of his sexual orientation began at 15 and by 17 he had
15 accepted that he was gay. The process of acceptance, however, was quite difficult. He
16 describes feeling a great deal of inner turmoil. This was exacerbated by that fact that
17 he attended a school that predominantly comprised of athletes. In the UK and other
18 western countries, these are known as academies. Accordingly, Victor lived in what
19 Anderson (2005) has previously called 'a near-total institution.' He only heard
20 athletes' voices at school and in his spare time, and his self-loathing was perpetuated
21 by the assimilation of strong heterosexist norms. As part of this, homosexuality was
22 stigmatized, therefore "homosexuality remained taboo and nobody talked about it."
23 Victor stated that he tried to deny his feelings and his sexuality:

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1 People around you make you think. Ignorance makes you think that it is
2 something weird, something bad, so I just thought ‘well, that’s something that
3 will go away.’ I just suppressed it. (...) Because it’s different, it’s not usual,
4 because it’s not what you are seeing.

5 His words reflect the existence of an established culture of heteronormativity:

6 When I was 15 and 16 years old, I also looked at girls. I was an elite athlete
7 and I did what I was supposed to do [objectify them]. I just followed the path
8 that I was supposed to follow.

9 Here, Victor suggests that because he was an elite athlete, there was an unwritten
10 norm concerning how athletes were ‘supposed’ to behave. This is consistent with
11 Anderson’s 2005 research on gay men in sport in the United States. In this context,
12 Victor complied with within the corporal parameters (strength and height) and
13 behaviour expected of him according to hegemonic masculinity theory (Connell,
14 1995).

15 During the process of maturation, however, despite being in a ‘near-total
16 institution’, Victor began to recognise that he was missing some essential information
17 on his sexuality. “What happens is that you have information about some things, but
18 you’ve got little information about the other thing [homosexuality]”. He contemplated
19 coming out, but fear kept him from doing so.

20 A part of me was scared of being rejected for making some comments about
21 where my sexual inclinations were directed. I didn’t do it because I was scared
22 of what was going to happen in the changing room. ‘Are they going to leave

1 me out [of their social group]? This fear lead me to the, no, no, this cannot
2 happen. I cannot come out.'

3 According to Victor, this period was the hardest for him: "When you are on
4 your own in this process, which starts from puberty until you more or less accept
5 yourself, I think this is the hardest thing. It's something that you cannot share with
6 anyone at all". These reminiscences carry echoes of how American gay men report
7 their feelings of being closeted (Anderson, 2005; **Savin-Williams, 1998**).

8 Like most other gay athletes who blaze a trail by coming out first, he had no
9 role models, no gay athletic colleagues or gay friendly environments to support him
10 (Anderson et al., 2016). In the absence of an affirming environment, and lacking gay
11 colleagues or role models, his sense of identity could not blossom. Troiden (1989)
12 suggests that people in his position typically develop a sensitization toward being gay,
13 followed by identity confusion. This confusion normally rectifies itself (at least in
14 those who come out and are therefore available as objects for study. This was also the
15 case for Victor:

16 During the last year of college I started to realize that perhaps what was
17 happening to me wasn't that bad. I thought that I could maybe be bisexual. As
18 I matured, I started to feel less scared about it.

19 Once he commenced his studies - Journalism and Communication at
20 University in Madrid – he felt a sense of relief. According to Troiden's stage model,
21 he developed a gay identity. It was during this time that he began to accept himself:

22 To start university, to meet people with a different type of mentality and
23 people similar to me, in that sense, made me realise. It removed the blindfold

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1 from my eyes. There I met people who were not just sportsmen. I met people
2 who weren't going to judge me and with whom I could speak openly. And
3 also homosexual people – like me.

4 Meeting other gay men who took a positive perspective on their sexual orientation
5 inspired Victor to share his sexual orientation with his two best sporting friends: a male
6 water polo player and a female synchronized swimmer. Their warm and affirming
7 reception inspired him to come out to his family. He also received support here. **He**
8 **explained:**

9 I have no father, but I have a mother and a brother who is a year younger. I have
10 never needed to actually sit my brother down and tell him because he has just
11 always known. I did have a conversation with my mother, however. It was after
12 finishing my first year at university. She said, "We have to talk". After I
13 confirmed with her that I am gay, she said, "Hey, I am your mother. I'll always
14 love you". My mother is pro-gay, super-open minded too.

15 Support from family and friends gave Victor confidence to come out to others.
16 He describes his thought process in the following terms: "Fucking hell mate, they
17 may [find out]... they may notice for this reason or for that other reason." Then I said
18 to myself "relax, don't worry about it, and things like that".

19 "*Don't ask-Don't tell*"

20 Victor has been out to some since he was 19 years old. But he was only fully
21 out to close family and friends. During this period, which Troiden (1989), calls
22 "commitment"; there is an acceptance of being homosexual as a "natural" and
23 "normal" way of life. For Victor, he decided that he was not going to explicitly tell

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1 people, but that he was not going to hide it either. Anderson (2005) describes this as
2 living in a revolving closet, where the athlete is out to some, but not to others. He
3 explained:

4 Look, I don't have to sit next to anyone to say anything but neither do I have
5 to hide. It was a natural process, losing the fear, losing this caution that one
6 can have at the beginning. I realized that it is absolutely normal.

7 During this phase of coming out, Victor ceased to police where he would go, and
8 whom he would put pictures of on social media. This sent symbolic messages about
9 his sexuality to those who were not otherwise explicitly aware; but it is significant
10 here that neither were they made explicitly aware. This was particularly true from the
11 age of 20 to 24 and particularly within the sporting domain. Anderson (2005)
12 describes this as a *don't ask, don't tell* culture. Victor explained that:

13 I was already out of the closet inside my environment but I did not talk openly
14 about the subject with people in sport. I was not hiding, but let's say it was
15 thinly veiled? Then it was like a balance there. I used to go training and so
16 on... people probably guessed as much, but I did not talk to anyone openly
17 about it.

18 During this time, Victor suspected that his teammates knew, even though he
19 never discussed it. And despite existing within a *don't ask, don't tell* culture, he felt
20 more welcomed and respected than before.

21 We are a very small family in water polo, and I guess that people, similar to
22 what happens in the workplace, end up knowing all about each other. So from

1 that moment on, I started to feel that I was not hiding and that people still
2 respected me as much, still valued me as much.

3 Anderson (2002) has documented the same psychological phenomena among
4 those team sports athletes he interviewed for the first-ever research on the experiences
5 of openly gay male athletes in American team sports. Anderson suggested that this
6 was a form of reverse-relative deprivation. Whereas relative deprivation theory
7 (Davies 1962) states that people tend to compare themselves to those who have it
8 better; in this case, gay athletes compared themselves to what they anticipated would
9 be worse treatment. When the worse case scenario does not emerge, they feel elated
10 about the level of team support they receive, even if it is still a form of second class
11 citizenship.

12 In Anderson's work (2005), he found that this was particularly true after an
13 athlete came out explicitly to his team. For Victor, this occurred when he was 21,
14 when a gay publication convinced him that it would be beneficial to sport and to
15 Spanish society if an elite athlete like himself publicly came out of the closet.
16 However, at that point he wasn't ready to do so: "It was too much just to think about
17 it. If I did the article, everyone would know. This scared me. So I refused to make that
18 leap. I was just not prepared mentally to be out nationally." This leap would come
19 four years later.

20 *Coming Out*

21 Aged 25, on May 2016, at his own volition, Victor came out publicly. He did this by
22 appearing in an article on Shangay.com. He commented on this:

1 Over time, I was starting to hide less, or let's say, I didn't care about what
2 other people thought about it. Then I said: "Look, I have been out of the closet
3 with my family for a long time, and with my best friends... and now, in sports,
4 if people don't know it is because they don't want to see it".

5 He added: "If I do this [come out publicly]" he thought, "my life is going to
6 change very, very little. Realistically, it's not going to change at all!" Victor describes
7 his himself as having a more mature attitude than previously. But while he may have
8 told himself that there would be no negative ramifications of doing so, he was not
9 without fear. Just before coming out, old anxieties re-emerged.

10 When I was ready, I had some stage fright (...) But I thought, "Look, if
11 you've done this, and the article is here because that's what you wanted, then
12 that is what you've decided and you were sure. So, go ahead. Do it."

13 Victor has had no difficulty on his team after coming out publicly. Just as was
14 the case in Anderson's (2002, 2011a) studies of gay men in sport, in which no athletes
15 were physically assaulted, bullied, or harassed by either teammates or coaches, the
16 same was true for Victor. He explained that he was even given more respect. "In
17 sport, I have found that people can be homophobic, but they have always been very
18 respectful towards me. And that [respect] is what I've always found in sport." When
19 queried about what he meant by homophobic people being more respectful, Victor
20 responded that his heterosexual colleagues discussed with him how they used and still
21 use some homophobic language, but that it was not intended to relate directly to
22 homosexuality. Victor's teammates did not wish to offend Victor with their language.

1 Because of this, teammates have mostly changed the way they use discourse related to
2 homosexuality.

3 From his teammates in the club – where he has been appointed Team Captain
4 by the coach - he feels tremendous respect and support. He describes a situation of
5 acceptance concerning his sexuality. Unlike in earlier studies of gay men (Anderson,
6 2002) he finds that his teammates do talk about it, even in the locker room:

7 Yes, yes, there are a lot of conversations about [sex]... About who's dated this
8 one, or who's dated that other one. And, well, when I have to contribute to
9 these conversations, I do. I may not do it in the same way as I would speak
10 about it with other friends in a different context, but there is a healthy
11 atmosphere in that sense and... if I have to talk, or if they ask me, then I do
12 speak.

13 It is not just a matter of him talking, it is also a matter of his teammates
14 asking. This thoroughly breaks the *don't ask, don't tell* culture. Also, in highlighting
15 that his teammates do ask him about his romantic/sexual life, he confirms findings of
16 what Anderson (2009) calls inclusive masculinity among his ostensibly heterosexual
17 teammates. But this inclusive environment is not down to the players alone. In
18 Anderson's (2005) research, also supported by Oswalt and Vargas (2013), Victor
19 found that the coach helped shape a culture of inclusivity.

20 Victor points out that his relationship with his coaches, and his coaches'
21 behaviour, has not changed. After he came out publicly, the national team coach came
22 to him and said "congratulations" telling him that it was an important and necessary
23 step. Victor states that he has felt fully supported by his club, but he has not received

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1 any explicit support from the Spanish Federation. He explained: “The president of the
2 Spanish Federation didn’t contact me. The president of my club did. The technical
3 director of the Federation didn’t contact me, the one of my club did”. Victor does not
4 know if this is because the Federation does not support him. It may simply be because
5 of the familiar environment of his club. It may also be that the Federation thinks it
6 might be making his sexuality out to be different by acknowledging it. We do not
7 know.

8 What we can say, however, is that he has been at this club for 8 years, and that
9 he is the team captain of this club. He has had not only explicit support, but resources
10 dedicated to him. “They offered me the swimming pool for free to produce the article
11 that appeared in Shangay.” He added, “Once the article was written, it was also
12 published on the club web page, too”.

13 We cannot say whether an athlete of lesser ability, or with less social capital
14 on a team, would fair as well coming out of the closet as Victor has. Some,
15 particularly older, research suggests that athletic capital is important in warding off
16 social stigma. For example, in Anderson’s (2002) study of gay male high school and
17 collegiate athletes, it was found that 22 of the 26 had high athletic capital, compared
18 with only five of the 16 closeted athletes studied. In Anderson and Bullingham’s
19 (2015) study of lesbian women high school and collegiate athletes, it was also found
20 that 12 athletes were judged to be valuable to their teams because they were either
21 starters or key players. Seven of the 12 even described themselves as the team’s top
22 player. Thus, athletic capital might have, and may still, influence who comes out and
23 who does not in sport. On the other hand, in Anderson’s more recent work in the USA
24 (2011a), this was not the case. He found athletes coming out across the ability-
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1 spectrum. There is just not enough evidence in the Spanish context to determine the
2 impact of ability on the reception of an athlete coming out. Similarly, there is not
3 enough data available to explore intersections of class, race, age, or physical
4 attraction.

5 Without knowing for sure, Victor still fears it would be more difficult for an athlete of
6 lesser abilities:

7 For an athlete who is at the beginning of his elite sport career, homosexuality
8 is a label that can never be removed. He might be afraid that his professional
9 career will end there. But when you are a little older you can say: “Look, this
10 won’t happen, because I already have a record of performing”.

11 These concerns aside, Anderson’s collective body of research on the
12 experience of openly gay male athletes in the US shows that athletes are almost,
13 without fail, pleasantly surprised by their coming out experience. Sometimes this is
14 the case in light of reverse relative deprivation (Anderson 2002). His research (2011a)
15 also finds that gay men almost unanimously wish they had come out in sport sooner.
16 This was also the case for Victor. “I regret not having treated the topic more naturally
17 before” he said. “It’s been one of the best things I’ve ever done”. He added:

18 I regret not having done it before. I’m very happy because all the
19 consequences have been positive. Look, all my social media networks are
20 open and I haven’t had any negative comments or insults. People have
21 supported me, they have thanked me because of what they think I’ve done.

22 *A Semi-Inclusive Climate?*

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1 The evidence that Victor's narrative offers that branch of the sociology of
2 sport concerned with homosexuality and elite sport in Spain, is that he is the only
3 explicitly openly gay athlete playing in a masculinised team sport. Victor told us how
4 he has been accepted and supported in his daily dealings with friends, teammates,
5 coaches, and other stakeholders within sport. However, he may still live in what
6 Piedra et al. (2017) might classify as a semi-inclusive state. We view this proposition
7 as just that - a proposition because he is the 'only' one; and also, because there is a
8 degree of homophobic discourse at play in Spanish sport. Victor illuminates the first
9 point when he says:

10 I knew people that I assumed were gay. But when I asked them, these people
11 would say "No. I'm not." They denied it. And then after a few years they
12 came out of the closet, but not as active elite athletes [after retirement]".

13 When asked why he thought this was, he answered: "I guess trying to balance elite
14 sport with making your homosexuality public was not easy for them. So I imagine
15 they came out when it was right for them".

16 Victor went on to say that this still happens. "I meet sports people everyday
17 who are gay and are in the closet". When again asked why these athletes remained
18 closeted, he answered:

19 There is fear, as I said, fear of being rejected in the changing room. And then
20 the fans, right? I don't know. In a water polo game there may be five hundred
21 people max? So if there are ten idiots in that group that insult you, that's
22 bearable. But in a basketball stadium or when there are thousands of people, I

1 guess the same percentage of idiots would mean rejection on a far larger scale.

2 It increases exponentially and it wouldn't be that easy.

3 While there are no recent cases of athletes in any sport losing their

4 sponsorships after coming out of the closet, Victor suggests that closeted gay athletes

5 may fear this all the same. These fears may not always be rational, but there are also

6 some grounds for concern for some athletes. He notes that for some athletes,

7 sponsorships come from companies from cultures with extremely high rates of

8 homophobia. He says: "Thinking of football, Real Madrid is sponsored by Fly

9 Emirates [A middle Eastern Company]; and Barcelona is sponsored by Qatar Airways

10 [another Middle Eastern Country]". Fear of rejection is likely to be stronger where a

11 sponsor is based in more homophobic countries like these. For this reason, Victor

12 suggests that it is easier to come out in sports with only minimal media attention,

13 where there is less money and less pressure in general. However, he argued:

14 There are few corporate sponsorships available in minority sports. My specific

15 sport has very few. Despite this, I have been offered more sponsorships than

16 before I came out. Far from having my contracts dropped, I have more today.

17 Sponsors want me because I get more media attention [as he is openly gay].

18 Based on his experiences, Victor reckons other gay athletes should come out.

19 As Anderson (2005) discovered with openly gay male athletes, Victor feels the

20 psychological burden is less out of the closet than in the closet. He points out: "I

21 encourage people to come out of the closet because, at the end of the day you have to

22 put a mask on when you are in the closet. It's better to be yourself". Still, he is against

23 forcing people to come out, a phenomenon known as "outing". He says that coming

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1 out, "is a very, very personal issue. It's not possible to force anyone out of the closet,
2 that's a personal choice".

3 *Homophobic Discourse*

4 As with other research on homophobia in sport, Victor highlights that, "just because
5 you haven't experienced any homophobic harassment or abuse, this does not mean
6 that there is no homophobia in the locker room". He says that homophobic insults are
7 very common in sport. He says that other athletes will say:

8 Poof. He's a poof, whatever. There have always been people like that and I
9 think there will always be. This language is used a lot as a joke, to offend
10 others,... and I don't like it, but I think it is something really, really difficult to
11 change...

12 Even though he does not like the use of such language, he seems to conform to
13 it. This, again, can be viewed through reverse-relative deprivation. He argues:
14 "Nobody has ever said to me before or after I was out of the closet, 'fucking poof'. He
15 clarifies that he has heard it, but not from someone who knew he was gay and they
16 would have called anyone that in that particular context. **Victor has heard teammates**
17 **say things like, "Fag, he's a fag," about other players.** He argues that this has
18 **always occurred in sport and always will.** Yet he highlights that this language is
19 **not designed to be homophobic because those using it do not add intensifiers to**
20 **it.** Victor says that he has never, for example, been told that he is a 'fucking poof'
21 **or in any context heard the words fag used in a way that suggested dislike of his**
22 **homosexuality.**

1 Victor explains that he ignores these kinds of comments. He does not see
2 himself as a victim of homophobia and he even considers homophobic insults as
3 unusual. He is not convinced that these types of insults stem from homophobia, either.
4 As other research on this topic suggests, there are two ways to view use of this
5 language when it does occur.

6 The first, a more traditional sociological approach, is to suggest that the
7 heteronormativity is so prevalent that even people who fall victim to it are not fully
8 conscious of it. This argument maintains that homophobic discourse, however it is
9 used, is laden with intent and thus produces a culture that discriminates against gay
10 men, whatever the intent behind the language (Van der Bom et al. 2015). The second
11 way of interpreting it, is to use a model developed by McCormack (2011) who
12 suggests that a complex set of dynamics determine how language is used and
13 understood. Originally ascribing this to cultural lag (McCormack and Anderson,
14 2010), he argues that the meaning of language is determined not just by presumed
15 intent, but by the social dynamics of the context, including whether there are mutually
16 agreed upon social norms about sexuality in that context (McCormack et al., 2016).
17 That is, words such as ‘poof’ might not be homophobic, depending on the values and
18 understanding of the people involved. Magrath (2017) highlights how this is the case
19 in sporting venues, where homophobic chants are used by gay friendly fans—and is
20 an issue of competitiveness rather than homophobia. Victor says: “It’s such a difficult
21 thing to change that... And then, you need to put things into perspective. As I said to
22 you, it may not be a homophobic attack, it is just the language that people use”.

23 **Discussion**

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1 The purpose of this research was to examine the contextually relevant experiences of
2 the first-ever openly gay elite athlete in a Spanish team sport. This research therefore
3 drew on existing literature on gay men in sport, while also providing one of the few
4 examinations of this topic outside of the United States (Cleland, 2014a, 2014b;
5 Roberts, Anderson and Magrath 2017). It enhances the existing sociological literature
6 because it addresses a gap in research concerning the experiences of openly gay elite
7 athletes, especially in the Spanish context.

8 In addressing this void, the findings from this research were consistent with
9 research on gay men coming out in team sports in the United States. This suggests
10 that Victor's coming out mirrored the experiences of sportsmen from the States, and
11 that despite this being located within a different culture, the theories underpinning the
12 existing body of work in the English-speaking context are equally applicable here.

13 As in previous studies (Anderson 2002, 2011a; Anderson et al., 2016) the
14 coming out experience was more positive than the athlete had expected. This is
15 because closeted gay men must pass through the various psychological stages of
16 coming to terms with their sexuality before they make this private identity public. As
17 with other athletes, it appeared that reverse-relative deprivation was also a factor in
18 Victor's experiences. This is evidenced by his surprised reaction to the inclusivity he
19 experienced from his teammates, trainers, managers and supporters. None of them
20 directly rejected him verbally concerning his gay identity and he was not physically
21 assaulted or verbally harassed. He felt respect from all those close to him within the
22 sporting environment. This has led Victor to analyse his experiences in a positive
23 light, even though some concerns did also emerge from our discussions.

1 Those concerns largely surrounded his perception of an existing
2 heteronormative culture, which he evidences by the fact that other professional
3 athletes have not come out while still actively involved, but only afterwards. This
4 supports the theory that homosexuality is neither fully taboo (he has, after all, been
5 welcomed warmly) but not altogether normal/looked favourably upon, either. Gays in
6 sport, in Spain, appear to be in something of a liminal state. This is supported by other
7 recent work on inclusive masculinities in the Spanish context. This research (Piedra et
8 al., 2017) suggests that millennial men in Spain exist neither in a state of
9 homoerasure, nor homohysteria. Yet the researchers did not sense millennial men
10 enjoyed a state of inclusivity, either. For this reason, the concept of an intermediate
11 stage, semi-inclusivity, was created. It is a label that we may come to find useful in
12 this research as well.

13 We could also use such data to determine which institutions offer an inclusive
14 environment, and which ones only a semi-inclusive environment, too. We could, for
15 example, suggest that the sporting environment acts as a barrier to inclusivity, while
16 his university acted as a facilitator of it. There is no doubt that for Victor, his sense of
17 self and a positive sexual identity was promoted through the contacts and support he
18 received at university. This helped him negotiate the various stages of identity
19 development that Troiden (1989) suggests occurs. But we cannot definitively say this
20 without knowing what percentage of males attending university are gay or bisexual,
21 and what percentage of professional athletes likewise. Without knowing this, we
22 cannot make claims regarding the impact of culture on the coming out process. While
23 it is tempting to perceive sport as homophobic due to the lack of gay men within this
24 culture, we are keen to point out that the absence of evidence is not evidence of

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1 absence. It is quite possible that, for a number of reasons, gay men are significantly
2 under-represented in these types of sports. Given that, we cannot assume that it is
3 homophobia which is responsible for the low representation of gay men in Spanish
4 team sports.

5 Regarding the incidence of antigay language, on the one-hand our findings are
6 consistent with Hekma (1998), Price (2000) and Anderson (2002), who all found that
7 gay athletes were frequently exposed to antigay language from their heterosexual
8 teammates and opponents. On the other hand, as with more recent research (Magrath,
9 2017; McCormack, 2011, 2012; McCormack, Wignall and Morris, 2016), they
10 reported that they did not view this language as being homophobic, either. More
11 research is needed to understand whether there is pernicious intent behind such
12 discourse commonly used in the modern Spanish context.

13 We also cannot make definitive claims about the impact of sporting capital on
14 coming out. Generally, as Anderson and Bullingham (2015) point out, athletes with
15 high athletic capital are fundamental to the team's success and are therefore less likely
16 to face discrimination. We do not yet know whether Victor's high performance capital
17 was influential in this area, because unlike in the English-speaking context (Anderson,
18 2011a), there were no athletes of lower capital for comparison purposes. More
19 research will be required, if and when future athletes come out.

20 What we can, however, definitively state—and what we believe to be a
21 valuable contribution to the literature concerning gay men and sport—is that while
22 this is a case study, and it would be misleading to state that physical aggression and
23 verbal harassment toward openly gay males in elite team sport does not happen,

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1 Victor's case does demonstrate a space for inclusivity in sport. It does show that, in
2 the case of this team, Spanish sport can exist within a state of semi-inclusivity at least.
3 Finally, the similarity between findings from this study and its English language
4 counterparts, and the equal application of relevant theories to both, is striking. This
5 should be of use to future scholars seeking to examine the relationship between
6 masculinity and gay men within Spanish sport.

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