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How Much Difference is too Much Difference? Perceptions of Gay Men and Lesbians in Intercollegiate Athletics

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Researchers qualitatively examined how and why student-athletes, coaches and athletic administrators at 5 NCAA Division I universities accepted some forms of diversity so readily, but remained closed and even hostile to gay men, lesbians and bisexuals.

On the surface, intercollegiate athletics provides a notable example of creating community across difference. Although students involved in sports like football, basketball, and track at Division I institutions constitute a much more diverse group than students on campuses as a whole, community seems especially strong on these teams. On these teams, students from a vast array of backgrounds integrate into a coherent whole where factors such as race and socio-economic status assume much less meaning compared to what individuals can contribute to the team (Wolf-Wendel, Toma, & Morpew, 2001). However, another form of diversity, sexual orientation, remains a potentially divisive issue in athletics. Indeed, student-athletes, coaches, and administrators in athletics are often homophobic and heterosexualist. We examined how and why those in athletics at five NCAA Division I universities accept some forms of diversity so readily, but remain closed and even hostile to issues of difference related to sexual orientation.

Sexual orientation is a socially con-

structed phenomenon, the meaning of which is constantly changing (Nussbaum, 1997; Tierney, 1997). In other words, American society has chosen to differentiate and label people based on whether they are intimate with same sex or different sex partners, and has endowed these distinctions with stereotypes that may or may not be salient to those being labeled, either now or in the future. We present the views of “others,” namely coaches, student-athletes, and athletics administrators on homosexuality in general—and gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals in athletics in particular—as constructed at a specific period of time within a specific context.

The research concerning the role of gay men and lesbians in intercollegiate athletics, and in sports more generally, is limited. Hekma (1998) found that gay men and lesbians in organized nonprofessional athletics are silenced and invisible. She also concluded that in cases where lesbian athletes were more open about their sexual orientation, they encountered a higher level of discrimination. Indicative of the homophobic and heterosexual environment promulgated in athletics, Hekma was not able to find instances in which gay male athletes were open about their sexual orientation. Further, Harry (1995) found that sports ideology is clearly associated with sexist and anti-

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homosexual attitudes. In their research, Rotella and Murray (1991), Dundes (1985), and Rodrigues (1993) were also able to corroborate the finding that athletes and coaches are overwhelmingly both homophobic and heterosexist.

Athletes are not the only group on college and university campuses who express an intolerance of homosexuality. Gay men and lesbians in higher education are frequently victims of discrimination, negative stereotypes, and overtly hateful acts (D'Augelli, 1989; DeBord, Good, Sher & Wood, 1998; Herek, 1993; Rhoads, 1994). Indeed, a significant body of research has demonstrated that many undergraduates hold negative and stereotypical views about gay men and lesbians (Black, Oles, & Moore, 1998; Eliason, 1997; Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1997; Geasler, Croteau, Heineman, & Edlund, 1995; Schellenberg, Hirt, & Sears, 1999; Simoni, 1996). In particular, men are more likely than women to have negative views of gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals (Engstrom & Sedlacek,; La Mar & Kite, 1998), and African American students (a group heavily represented among those in our study) are more likely than White students to express homophobic sentiments (Black et al.).

What is so striking about intercollegiate athletics with respect to issues of sexual orientation is that the heterosexist and homophobic views held by student-athletes, coaches, and athletics administrators exist in sharp contrast to their progressive conceptualizations of other forms of difference. We found that intercollegiate athletics generally provides a powerful model for creating community across difference in terms of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and sometimes gender (Wolf-Wendel, Toma, & Morphey, 2001). Moreover, the extent to which those in athletics openly express

hostility to gay men and lesbians seems above and beyond that found on other parts of campus. These are the issues that we explore in this study.

These issues are of paramount importance, particularly for college student development. Ample evidence has indicated that a non-supportive environment can be detrimental to gay men and lesbians, regardless of whether they are in or out of the closet. Rhoads (1994), for example, described cases in which gay men consider suicide, face depression, feel isolated, fear for their own safety, and generally experience undue anxiety when faced with a hostile environment. Furthermore, Krane (1996), in her study of lesbians in athletics, found that the athletics environment contributed to low self-esteem, low confidence, high stress, and substance abuse. Similarly, Rotella and Murray (1991) explained that athletes who are gay and lesbian have experienced negative psychological ramifications due to the homophobia and heterosexism in their sports.

Lest those in athletics believe that homophobia and heterosexism are not relevant to their goals of winning, Krane (1996) also found that a negative environment for lesbians can negatively affect athletic performance. As a student-athlete in Rotella and Murray's (1991) study explained,

If someone is thinking and feeling unaccepted by others on the team, it has to take away from his/her performance. By understanding each individual and accepting them for who they are, athletes will be able to use each other for a source of strength instead of a source of fear. (p. 359)

Given the likelihood that gay men and lesbians are found in athletics in proportion to their presence in the rest of society this is

an issue that must be taken seriously. Finally, this study, although focusing on intercollegiate athletics, can nonetheless provide insight for the rest of the campus in eliminating discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

METHOD

To explore how athletics teams respond to different forms of diversity, we conducted qualitative case studies of five Division I institutions that are representative of the different types of universities that compete at the highest and most visible level in intercollegiate athletics. We used purposive sampling to best represent the diversity of institutions that compete at this level (Creswell, 1998). The institutions differ from one another on the following dimensions: academic reputation, geographic region, size and type of local community, diversity within the local community, diversity within the campus community, general openness to diversity, diversity among student-athletes, diversity among coaches and athletics administrators, strength of tradition in athletics, resources available to athletics, and size of athletics department budget. We chose to look at athletics within these five institutions because we believed initially that the results might differ depending on the institutional context.

At these sites, we focused on the teams that are generally marked by diversity: football, men's and women's basketball, and men's and women's track and field. At several of these institutions men and women compete on a single track and field team, which allowed us to explore the role of gender diversity within a team. We selected these teams because they are typically diverse in terms of race and ethnicity. Specifically, the

NCAA (1996) reported that 41% of all male student-athletes at Division I schools are people of color, whereas 24% of women student-athletes are people of color. Of the five schools in our study, minorities constitute 63% of football players, 52% of women basketball players, 75% of those in men's basketball, 52% of those in women's track and field, and 46% in men's track and field.

We visited each campus in two-person teams for 2 or 3 days to gather data through interviews, focus groups, document reviews, and observations. Before visiting each campus, we secured the cooperation of the athletics department through the athletics director, whose office assisted in scheduling the interviews and focus groups. We conducted 12 to 15 formal interviews or focus groups on each campus, with 35 to 65 individuals per campus. We made particular efforts to include those who are traditionally underrepresented in intercollegiate athletics, such as women and African American administrators and Native American, Hispanic, and Asian Americans student-athletes. In interviews and focus groups, we asked questions about how members of teams focused on building community and responded to differences not only with regard to sexual orientation, but also race, gender, socioeconomic level, and geographic region. Our questions about sexual orientation brought about the most highly charged responses.

We analyzed the interview and focus group transcripts using the constant comparative approach. Thus, we took an inductive approach to analyzing data, working to identify common themes and emerging patterns. We took appropriate measures to ensure that the derived categories were internally consistent, but distinct from one another. Two additional internal checks on

decisions were to search throughout the analysis process for negative instances and for rival structures. We stopped searching for data to generate and substantiate our ideas when we could find no additional data to embellish the concepts and their interrelationships (Conrad, 1982). As we analyzed the data, we came to realize that institutional context did not play a role in how individuals answered the interview questions. Indeed, we found not only no substantial differences across institutional types, but also very little variation between respondents across sports teams in terms of their views on diversity in general and sexual orientation in particular. As such, our data are not presented in case study form, but as data that cut across institutions.

The data collection and analysis in this study conform to the highest standards of qualitative research by employing common qualitative techniques to ensure trustworthiness: member check, triangulation, thick description, and audit trail (Lincoln & Guba 1985). This study employed several types of member checking to ensure credibility. We held informal debriefing sessions with key respondents immediately following the interviews to test initial understanding of the data gathered. We also contacted select participants several months after the interviews to test the evolving analytical categories, interpretations, and conclusions. These techniques confirmed our understanding of the data. We triangulated the data both within and across sites by interviewing a variety of participants at a range of Division I institutions and across a number of different teams. These attempts to triangulate data demonstrated great convergence and consensus of ideas among sources of data both within and across sites. In terms of thick description, we paid careful attention to the

context in which comments were offered and attempt to convey this description in our analysis of the data. Lastly, as Lincoln & Guba (1985) recommended, we created an audit trail—one that will allow an external auditor to examine both the processes and products of the study to ensure dependability and confirmability.

ANALYSIS

Homosexuality as a Divisive Issue

In general, we found that a remarkably strong sense of community exists among participants on intercollegiate teams. These bonds link students across many differences, including race, socioeconomic status, and geographic background. Student-athletes, coaches, and athletics administrators suggested several ways that participation fosters community for members of teams: (a) sharing a common goal; (b) engaging in intense, frequent interaction; (c) sharing adversity in the form of hard work, suffering, and sacrifice; (d) having a common enemy; (e) recognizing that each individual has something important to contribute; (f) holding team members accountable; and (g) having coaches who guide them. These lessons are discussed in detail in a companion article (Wolf-Wendel, Toma, & Morpew, 2001).

In contrast to our findings on the ways in which athletics builds community regardless of racial, socioeconomic, and geographic diversity, sexual orientation remains a divisive issue in athletics. Student-athletes and coaches gave mixed responses when asked about gay men or lesbians on their teams. At best, those in intercollegiate athletics embraced a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. One male coach explained, “I don’t know that we’ve really had *that* problem, but we don’t bring it up” [*italics added*]. At

worst, they were unwilling to make a place for gay men and lesbians on their teams. Coaches and student-athletes acknowledged that gay and lesbian student-athletes existed, but insisted they played other sports. For example, one male coach suggested that homosexuality came up less often in track and field and believed gay men and lesbians were more prevalent in other sports, whereas another track and field coach argued that homosexuality was not an issue in her sport, because hers was a “feminine type” sport. The notion that lesbianism was prevalent in specific sports was so commonplace that an athletics director noted that when he needed to add a new women’s sport to comply with Title IX, he chose swimming over softball because “they didn’t want to bring in a lot of those [lesbian] people.”

When asked how they would deal with gay or lesbian student-athletes, some coaches and student-athletes reported that it was a non-issue for their team, whereas others seemed less willing to sidestep the topic and expressed hostile reactions to the idea of gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals on their teams. For example, a female basketball coach stated: “We’ve been lucky, [lesbianism] hasn’t come here. I’ve heard about it. I really don’t know how [I would handle it] to be honest with you.” Similarly, a male football coach explained, “I think a goodly portion of those kinds of things get weeded out . . . in high school. . . . I just don’t think you get to be a junior or senior in high school and a good athlete with that kind of outward orientation.” A male basketball coach concurred, “It would only be an issue if it became divisive—if the team split over it. For example, if one’s lifestyle was being pushed on someone—as with having two camps on a team and both trying to ‘recruit’ a first-year student.” Student-athletes also

expressed similar sentiments. For example, a male football player stated, “Myself, I can communicate with a gay person but I am not for communicating with them every day and letting them touch me. I don’t want to talk about their sexual tendencies . . . that is their problem.”

Male and female respondents differed in their views about homosexuality. Whereas men were more likely to simply state whether they could or could not be comfortable having gay male student-athletes on their team, female student-athletes and coaches recognized the stereotypes that confronted women athletes. As one female basketball coach explained:

Believe me, I’ve gotten it and every female has gotten it. It’s just the tag you have . . . if you’re a good athlete or whatever, you’re energetic: “She’s a tomboy, she has to be a lesbian,” or whatever. You get a lot of that. . . . When recruits came in with short hair . . . [the team] welcomed them with open arms. Because I think they know how people are labeled and I guess they feel, “Well, we can’t label them [when] society and everybody else [is] labeling all of us.”

Many of the female student-athletes, in acknowledging that many believe they are lesbian, explained that they felt the need to separate themselves from that stereotype. One means of enhancing that separation from the label of lesbianism was to label others, particularly on other teams and at other schools, as being lesbian. “Negative recruiting” is common in athletics. This can involve suggesting the predominance of lesbians in another program to draw student-athletes to your “heterosexual” program. One student-athlete, for example, mentioned that during her recruitment visit to campus “the coach made it clear that there were no

lesbians on the team.” A women’s basketball coach, when asked if the issue came up in recruiting visits told us, “Yes, it is an issue in recruiting. There are some coaches in our part of the country who may use it as a negative thing. . . . I get asked by parents almost every time.”

We found a few exceptions to the negativism regarding homosexuality. For instance, we found that members of a women’s basketball team where several members of the team had come out viewed the situation in positive terms. One player on the team explained, “The more tolerance there is, the more open people are going to be, and the more accepting people are going to be.” Furthermore, the student-athletes on this team explained that having one person brave enough to come out changed the environment, which allowed other student-athletes to feel more comfortable being themselves. As one student-athlete noted,

When I went through freshman year to junior year it changed. My freshman year people would make derogatory comments about gay people or whatever right in the locker room. It wasn’t until last year that someone came out to me. It took for her to see my tolerance in order for her to confide in me.

As a second example, several male student-athletes indicated that they could be “forgiving” of someone who was gay or “look beyond it” if the person was truly a good athlete and an asset to the team. In this vein, the male student-athletes expressed the notion that “if that guy is a star player or something, it’ll probably affect them less. But, if he’s not . . .” Similarly, a student-athlete explained, “It depends on how he performs on the field. If he is good and he is watching my back, then it doesn’t matter.” However, the student-athlete who made this comment

also joked about the notion of a gay man “watching his back.” Recently, this belief that a good athlete would be able to “get away” with coming out was tested by a high school football player in Connecticut who came out to his coaches and teammates during his senior year. Corey Johnson, a star student-athlete, made national news not just because he came out, but also because his teammates responded positively to his announcement. In fact, the Boston Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network awarded both Johnson and his team a Visionary Award for tolerance (Reilly, 2000). The lesson to be learned from this experience, perhaps, is that the mantra repeated in athletics about winning being the main goal is true even with regard to responding to homosexuality. However, the media coverage of the reaction by Johnson’s teammates and the few positive comments from those in our study demonstrate the rarity of such perceptions in athletics.

Examining the overall message from these results, we found hostility to gay men and lesbians on nearly all teams and at all the case study sites. Clearly those in intercollegiate athletics are generally unwilling to confront and accept homosexuality. One common response was to avoid consideration of the issue altogether, instead pointing out the presence of gay men or lesbians in other sports. Another response was to argue that gay men or lesbians could not possibly be productive members of teams given the reaction that straight coaches and teammates would have to them. The bottom line was that as progressive and successful as people in athletics are in building community from diverse groups in terms of race, ethnicity, geography, socioeconomic status, and so on, they lagged considerably in creating a supportive environment for gay men and lesbians on their teams.

Explaining These Findings: Four Intersecting Hypotheses

Our findings concerning responses to gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals might be explained in light of what we found to be enlightened responses to other forms of diversity (Wolf-Wendel, Toma, & Morpew, 2001). Racism and heterosexism differ in important ways. Although both are expressions of power and fear, the two have different sources, different histories, and most people in the United States have different belief systems about the two sources of exclusion. Nonetheless, the power of having a common goal seemed so substantial in uniting athletics teams across racial differences that an exploration of why this common goal didn't work for combating heterosexism and homophobia is worthwhile. Specifically, we offer four different, though potentially intersecting, explanations.

Athletics Mirrors Society, Which Has Become More Comfortable With Race Than With Homosexuality

Athletics is a microcosm of U.S. society, and as such, the differences in how athletes respond to race compared to homosexuality may be understood in light of the relative progress our society has made in responding to these different issues. Although racism is still prevalent in U.S. society, including in intercollegiate athletics, our society has made progress in its elimination. The civil rights laws of the 1960s, for example, codified enforcement of equal protection, and policies such as affirmative action in the 1970s gave expression to these ideals.

As U.S. society tackled issues of race, so too did those in intercollegiate athletics. Not surprisingly, racial integration in college athletics came earlier in the North than in the South. By the 1950s, a few African

Americans were competing in sports like football and track in the North, although African American players on Northern football teams were still held out of some games based on the demands of Southern opponents (Watterson, 2000). In basketball, the first African American players did not compete in college basketball in conferences like the Big Ten until the early 1950s. It would not be until the 1970s that most Southern teams allowed African Americans to compete in basketball, as well as football. A turning point occurred during the 1966 NCAA Finals when the perennially powerful, but all-White Kentucky team lost to an all-African American starting five from upstart Texas Western (now UTEP). Even into the 1970s and 1980s, however, there were quotas for the number of African American players on a given squad, as well as unwritten limits on the number of African Americans that could be on the court at any one time (Watterson). Today, these types of racial barriers for college student-athletes have been eliminated. Sports has become much more of a meritocracy, raising the level of competition on the field and court. Indeed, people of color often form the majority on teams, especially in basketball, football, and track and field (NCAA, 1996).

In our society, similar rights and progress for gay men and lesbians have only recently begun to emerge. Until about 25 years ago, homosexuality was defined as an illness by the American Psychiatric Association. Federal civil rights laws still do not include an express provision protecting people on the basis of their sexual orientation; state legislation sanctioning civil unions is just now emerging, and "coming out" is still associated with considerable public controversy. At the same time, issues pertaining to homosexuality are more openly discussed than ever before

and have a forum via the media that seems to have helped raise the level of public discourse about homosexuality. For example, homosexuality was raised as a major issue in all three presidential debates in 2000. The media also demonstrated public outrage at the death of Matthew Sheppard, a college student in Wyoming who was brutally murdered by two young men because of his sexual orientation and the hateful acts of activists like Fred Phelps in Kansas, who received national press for his protests against homosexuality. Even the airing and acclaim of such contemporary television shows as *Ellen* and *Will & Grace* have helped to elevate U.S. society's views of homosexuality. Yet, although things are better on some fronts than they were only a few years ago, nothing approaches the advances U.S. society has made in race and gender equality. Further, each of these steps forward has been followed by a public backlash. Heterosexism and homophobia continue to exist in society and on college campuses throughout the country.

Interestingly, the same arguments that opponents of desegregation and women's rights used two and three decades ago are being used in opposition to inclusion of gay men and lesbians in the mainstream, including in intercollegiate athletics. Just as people argued that including persons of color would destroy cohesion and camaraderie in groups such as athletics teams, they now argue this about gay men and lesbians. The military provides an apt example. Desegregation in service units was controversial in the 1940s, but the military is now fully integrated. The same can be said of the inclusion of women at the service academies in the 1970s. The debate over the role of openly gay male or lesbian military personnel of the 1990s may very well run the same

course, which could have implications for other parts of our society.

When attempting to explain why some forms of difference could be overcome via having a common goal whereas other differences were perceived as insurmountable, participants indicated that the reason was based on societal acceptance of these two forms of difference. For example, one coach explained, "Social attitudes about race are further along than about sexual orientation." Similarly, an athletics administrator noted, "Sexual orientation attitudes are changing in the undergraduate population at large and consequently in the athletic student population." Still another coach commented,

It's a much healthier situation in 1999, than it was in 1989, than it was in 1979. There is no question that it is a far more volatile issue with a lot of people than [race] is . . . but I am seeing it change.

All of this suggests that our society in general and intercollegiate athletics in particular, is simply not as far along in the acceptance of gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals as we are in understanding and accommodating racial difference. U.S. history provides some cause for optimism, however. Only after decades of struggle has race become a less pronounced issue in sports. Today, formal barriers to participation for student-athletes of color have fallen. Views about homosexuality may move along the same path, as these issues are discussed and slowly accepted—or at least accommodated.

Student-Athletes Have More Exposure to Racial Differences Than to Differences in Sexual Orientation

Several researchers have hypothesized that increased contact between groups, under

certain circumstances, can help eliminate prejudice and stereotypes (Allport, 1954; Sherif et al., 1961). As such, one of the reasons racial integration has advanced in athletics when inclusion of openly gay men and lesbians has lagged is that there is a critical mass of people of color on teams. Out gay men and lesbian student-athletes are likely to be outnumbered on teams, as compared to racial minorities, who are actually a majority on many teams. In fact, because out gay men and lesbians are practically unheard of in athletics, student-athletes are likely to be exposed to gay and lesbian student-athletes without being aware of it (Hekma, 1998). As a result, the benefits of positive interaction with student-athletes who are openly gay, lesbian, and bisexual do not accrue to many members of athletics teams, whereas the benefit of exposure to members of different racial groups does occur.

The women's basketball team on which several student-athletes had come out was the only group of student-athletes in our study to express positive views about homosexuality. This finding supports the results of Tarricone's (1999) and Hekma's (1998) research, in which both concluded that because of exposure, participants in team sports become less homophobic if someone on the team comes out. Indeed, as few gay student-athletes come out while in college, fewer heterosexual student-athletes are exposed to this form of difference, making the reduction of prejudice and heterosexism even more unlikely. The issue of exposure is not one that should be laid at the feet of gay male and lesbian student-athletes. Rather, the negative environment created by those in athletics makes it difficult, if not impossible, for gay male and lesbian student-athletes to feel comfortable enough to come out.

Athletics might well be the ultimate "prison of heterosexual norms produced by silence" discussed in Rhoads study of the coming out process (1994, p. 76).

Athletics Embodies Hegemonic Masculinity

Student-athletes may view homosexuality more negatively than other forms of difference because athletics emphasizes masculinity, which they see to be in sharp contrast to male homosexuality. This hypothesis is consistent with Connell's (1990) definition of athletics as embodying "hegemonic masculinity," which he defines as the most valued form of masculinity because it separates men's and women's spheres and designates the latter as lesser. "Collision sports" and other team sports are seen as bastions of masculinity because of the violence that is integral to these sports (Connell, 1987; Crosset, 1990; Messner, 1990). Men who participate in these sports are by definition not only masculine, but are also seen as heroes. Enduring pain and experiencing exhaustion and collapse without regard to present or future ramifications is, in fact, a badge of honor in U.S. sport—especially in college sports. These values are also associated with manliness—which is another important value in both sport and society and is especially pronounced in the world of intercollegiate athletics (Connell, 1987; Connell, 1990; Eitzen & Sage, 1997). Those in our study often argued that homosexuality—especially in males—was incongruent with the masculine nature of athletics. For example, one coach told us that "guys are known as sissies if they are that way," when referring to gay male student-athletes. The belief that masculinity is in opposition to homosexuality represents a social construction, but it is a construction with

consequences for all involved.

This notion that persons who participate in athletics are, by definition, masculine, is important for several reasons. First of all, it threatens the legitimacy of women athletes and their sports. According to Eitzen and Sage (1997), male dominance is perpetuated in sport through simply defining sport as a male activity. As a result, women athletes and women's sports are routinely belittled and diminished. Or, women's participation is framed negatively based on stereotypes associated with masculinity. Accordingly, at all levels of competition, female athletes receive much less public attention than do male athletes, as well as less budgetary support and access to facilities. Moreover, men typically control sports—both for men and women—particularly at the intercollegiate level where the vast majority of senior athletics administrators and coaches of women's teams are men. The masculinity of athletics has been used to explain why many female athletes, particularly those who are good at their sports, are labeled lesbian (Kidd, 1988; Nelson, 1994; Parisot, 1998).

The second reason that the masculine nature of sports is important is because of the perceived inconsistency between this notion and the intimacy that athletes—particularly male athletes—experience as a result of athletics. Working together against adversity and toward common goals brings people on a team together in ways that cause them to care about each other. There remain boundaries, however. Compassion for a teammate is thought to be wholly apart from sexuality. Yet, there is evidence that intimate behaviors in athletics go beyond what is considered by some in our society to be acceptable, especially for males. Examples of these kinds of behaviors include hand-holding, butt slapping, and the exchange of

hugs that often occur spontaneously between teammates. In response to these intimate acts many male student-athletes react negatively against gay male and bisexual athletes as a way to separate their “normative” behavior from that which they perceive to be abnormal. According to Rhoads (1994), “Out of fear of their own same-sex attractions, men strive toward hyper-masculine identity. . . . To prove their ‘maleness’—and most important their lack of attraction for other men—they adopt machismo behaviors and take on extreme masculine identities” (p. 138). Freud (1961) defined this phenomenon as reaction formation—a defense mechanism that involves taking an action opposite to one's feelings to deny the reality of those feelings. Freud believed that many people who are passionate about a cause, such as being antihomosexual, may be doing so to hide their true feelings. If, as some suggest, athletics is inextricably linked with masculinity, then it shouldn't be surprising that anything that is perceived to threaten that notion will be feared or viewed with hostility (Dworkin & Wachs, 1998; Harry, 1995; Whitson, 1990).

Athletics Retards Individual Identity in the Effort to Achieve Conformity

Those in athletics may not really be better at responding to racial differences than they are at responding to homosexuality. The basis for this argument can be found in the athletics environment that emphasizes conformity rather than individuality. Coaches have traditionally been able to require that student-athletes conform to typically conservative team norms—norms that do not recognize the presence of discrimination in sports. Moreover, the self is commonly subordinate to the team for student-athletes—“There is no *I* in *TEAM*,” the saying goes. Order and control—values generally understood by U.S. society

to be important in areas such as business and government—are thought by coaches to be essential to success on the field or court (Oriard, 1993). Indeed, our data suggest that the environment in Division I intercollegiate athletics may retard identity development as a means of emphasizing the notions of team, cooperation, and community. As such, we suggest that student-athletes are not encouraged, and may be actively discouraged from proceeding along the stages of identity development, whether it is homosexual identity development or racial identity development. Examining a few of the identity theories and the power they give to the role of environment as a factor that supports or retards development illustrates this point.

Although the fact that sexual orientation is a social construction suggests that it may not always be a salient feature of one's identity (Nussbaum, 1997), scholars have nonetheless identified patterns relating to the development of a gay male or lesbian identity (Cass, 1979; D'Augelli, 1994). These researchers highlight that the notion of labeling oneself as lesbian or gay and the self-disclosure of one's sexual orientation is part of a process that determines positive identity development. According to these theories, homosexual identity development is influenced by a number of factors including the environment to which the individual is exposed. Individuals who find themselves in more supportive environments are likely to develop more easily, whereas an environment that is hostile is likely to impede an individual's development. Given the views expressed regarding homosexuality by student-athletes, coaches and athletics directors in the current study, one should not be surprised that relatively few gay men, lesbian, and bisexual intercollegiate student-athletes are out.

Similarly, the environment for student-athletes at Division I institutions does not necessarily encourage individuals to develop their sense of racial consciousness. In contrast to homosexuality, racial differences are typically visible, making it unnecessary for student-athletes to “come out” as Black. In other words, although student-athletes indicated that they were able to work with people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, they didn't necessarily mean that they were comfortable dealing with people for whom race is a major facet of their identity. Several researchers have suggested that students of color go through several stages in developing a sense of racial identity (Atkinson, Morten & Sue, 1993; Cross, 1991). These models share commonalities and typically suggest that individuals progress through stages in which they prefer the values of the dominant culture, experience confusion and conflict, actively reject the dominant culture, question the values of both their own and the dominant culture, and eventually develop a sense of cultural identity that draws from the values of both groups.

Few student-athletes in our study had ventured beyond the first-stage phase in that they seemed to view the world as being race-neutral. For example, although many Black coaches note the underrepresentation of people of color among the coaching and administrative ranks, few, if any student-athletes, made similar observations. Further evidence of this point comes from the finding that many student-athletes, both White and Black, made statements that trivialized differences between racial and ethnic groups. For example, the sentiment “I don't care if you are blue, green, purple, Black, or White, as long as you can play ball” was expressed by a large number of student-athletes, as well as coaches and administrators. Further, White

student-athletes did not seem to have a well-developed sense of racial identity as described by Helms (1993) in that they had no clear understanding of what it means to be White or of the racist nature of our society.

In fact, the emphasis on team, co-operation, and community may retard student-athletes from developing their own sense of identity as separate individuals. The reality is that like many others in society, the student-athletes and coaches we interviewed did not work to create a supportive environment for students who are gay, lesbian, and bisexual to come out, express their differences, and develop as individuals. Moreover, those in athletics did not encourage any team member to explore his or her individual identity. In some ways, this stance is not unique to athletics. Critics of higher education have argued that emphasizing differences between individuals and among groups leads to "self-segregation" and works against creating community (D'Souza, 1995; Schlesinger, 1995).

Even some members of the gay community argue that gay pride parades and "coming out days" hinder rather than help individuals who are gay, lesbian, and bisexual because these events emphasize differences from heterosexuals (Bawer, 1993). This idea, in fact, was expressed by many in our study. Specifically, student-athletes reported that they didn't have a problem with student-athletes who were gay men, lesbians or bisexuals as long as they acted and behaved the same as other team members. For example, one student-athlete indicated that he didn't understand why gay men felt the need to openly express their difference: "I don't understand why there is a gay march. If you are gay, it is fine, no one cares who you are sleeping with." Others said that as long as they didn't know a fellow student-

athlete was gay, his sexual orientation wouldn't be a problem. "I think it would be hard for us to know that he was gay – unless he told us . . . personally it wouldn't bother me as long as he can play and as long as he is dealing with it in an [appropriate] manner," one student-athlete suggested.

At the same time, however, the notion that difference should be ignored to facilitate community is problematic. Specifically, many commentators have recognized the importance of group identification in addressing community and in facilitating individual student development. They suggest that rather than problematizing the need of individuals to assert their identity and spend time with those who are like them, higher education professionals need to find ways to bring students from different groups together in meaningful ways while still allowing people to gather periodically "in comfort zones of shared experiences, identities and concerns" (Cortes, 1991, p. 11; Montero, 1995; Tatum, 1997). Nonetheless, as Tierney (1997) asked, "Is there any evidence that groups who are discriminated against have a better chance to lessen their stigma and attain their rights if they try to act as the mainstream does?" (p. 50). In fact, our study demonstrates that those in intercollegiate athletics are openly hostile to gay men and lesbians regardless of whether they have come out or remain in the closet.

Applying the Theories

Our attempt to explain why those in athletics are homophobic and heterosexist should not be interpreted as a means to "excuse" these beliefs or actions. Rather, our approach rests on the notion that understanding why something is occurring might help us to change attitudes and behaviors. In fact, our findings and interpretations can be important

to all coaches, student-athletes, and administrators, if one believes that part of the purpose of college is to make people more accepting of individual differences. As Tierney (1993) asked, "How is it possible to construct a community based on difference, if we do not enable those who are different to speak?"

Although the application of these lenses may have helped to explain the contrast between the ways in which student-athletes and coaches approach other differences as compared with homosexuality, they do not provide remedies. So, the question remains: How can higher education professionals help student-athletes and coaches to adopt more inclusive attitudes toward student-athletes who are gay, lesbian, and bisexual? If athletics mirrors society in its acceptance of homosexuality, higher education professionals cannot expect student-athletes or others on campus to become comfortable and accepting of homosexuality overnight nor can the problems of society serve as an excuse for inaction. Rather, we can work to enact some of the same types of approaches that have served us well in our efforts to combat racism on campus. As such, we can work to make sure that formal and informal policies don't serve as barriers to gay, lesbian, and bisexual students in attaining leadership positions on campus. Further, higher education professionals can lobby to include sexual orientation in civil rights policies on the campus level and in legislation at the state and federal levels. One real-life example of this was cited by the Oberlin athletics director, who noted the addition of sexual orientation to the nondiscrimination clause in the NCAA's charter (Muska, 2000). These kinds of policy changes may help to make explicit and formalize the legitimacy of student-athletes who are gay, lesbian, and

bisexual, just as civil rights legislation did for members of racial/ethnic minority groups.

The other perspectives investigated in this paper also suggest appropriate responses. Although higher education professionals cannot require student-athletes (or others on campus) to interact with persons whom they know are gay, lesbian, and bisexual, we can work to create a climate that is more supportive of these students' coming out process. If we are able to do this, we accomplish the goal of increased interaction indirectly because as the number of out gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals on campus increases, interactions between these students and others on campus will occur. And, although higher education professionals may not be able to change the aura of masculinity surrounding athletics, we can work to overcome stereotypes, thus diluting the charges that the idea of a gay football player is paradoxical. As Muska (2000) suggested "Open discussions with our athletes, as well as campus visits by former athletes who came out after graduating (we all have them)" would serve to address this issue (p. B12). Further research and deconstruction of the relationship between athletics and the social construction of gender is also essential if we are to make progress in helping those in athletics think about these issues differently.

Finally, educating coaches and administrators about identity development theories and ways to assist their students in making progress through these stages may encourage more student-athletes to progress through the stages of identity development. Just as student affairs administrators are expected to apply their knowledge of these theories to the general student population, they can help coaches and athletics administrators to see these educative duties as part of their role. Although some coaches may fear that this

will work against the notion of team in the short run, we in education believe that fostering student development is an essential part of the collegiate process and may help to foster a deeper sense of community. In the end, each of the lenses applied above can help us to better understand what goals higher education professionals should have if we truly want to confront and change the homophobic and heterosexist environments found in athletics departments and many other areas of the academy.

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