

The Declining Existence of Men's Homophobia in British Sport

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Abstract

This research provides the first-ever quantitative account of British university athletes' attitudes toward having a gay male teammate. We use a four-year longitudinal study to investigate athletes' attitudes concerning gay men in their sporting spaces. Using questionnaires of 216 male athletes from all university sports offered upon entry (2006), and then again upon exiting the university (2009), we show that attitudinal dispositions of homophobia have decreased from minimal (upon entrance) to non-existent (upon exit). We find that the strength of one's athletic identity is associated with lesser degrees of support for gay teamsport athletes upon entering the university, but that this effect does not emerge upon exiting. We highlight the study's results, situating them within inclusive masculinity theory, and discuss how results might vary at other institutions.

Keywords: homophobia, sport, gay athletes, teammates, identity, collegiate sport

Introduction

While researchers have examined *campus* climate for attitudes toward gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender university students (Rankin, 2003), few studies have assessed the undergraduate athletic climate for gay, lesbian, and bisexual athletes (Southall, Nagel, Anderson, Polite & Southall, 2009; Southall, Anderson, Southall, Nagel & Polite, 2011; Wolf-Wendel, Toma, & Morphew, 2001). None have examined the issue in the United Kingdom. This study therefore seeks to address this void. We examine male undergraduate athletes' attitudes toward the idea of having a gay teammate or a gay coach, and having gay men share their locker-room space. In examining athletes' attitudes with quantitative data, we add to a body of recent qualitative research that highlights a rapid decrease in cultural homophobia among teamsport athletes (Adams, Anderson & McCormack, 2010; Anderson 2000, 2002, 2005a, b, 2009, 2011; Anderson & McGuire, 2010). This study, showing a near-total abandonment of homophobia among these university athletes, should therefore provide a foundation from which other researchers can investigate other aspects of teamsport culture in England. Results also have the potential to improve research methodologies designed to investigate sexual-orientation attitudes, initiate policy discussions related to athletes' sexual orientations, and aid in development of educational programs to encourage acceptance of diverse athlete populations.

Theoretical Framework

Homophobia in Sport

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, men's sport—particularly men's teamsports—were characterized by high levels of homophobia. Researchers who examined the relationship between gay men and sport largely agreed that organized sport existed as a hostile environment for gay men (Clarke, 1998; Curry, 1991; Griffin, 1998; Hekma, 1998; Messner,

1992; Pronger, 1990; Wolf-Wendel, Toma, & Morpew, 2001). Pronger wrote, “Many of the [gay] men I interviewed said they were uncomfortable with teamsports... [O]rthodox masculinity is usually an important subtext if not *the* leitmotif in teamsports” (p. 26). In 1992, Messner stated, “The extent of homophobia in the sports world is staggering. Boys [in sports] learn early that to be gay, to be suspected of being gay, or even to be unable to prove one’s heterosexual status is not acceptable” (p. 34). Hekma (1998) noted, “Gay men who are seen as queer and effeminate are granted no space whatsoever in what is generally considered to be a masculine preserve and a macho enterprise” (p. 2). Accordingly, men’s sports have often been described as a setting where a homophobic version of hegemonic masculinity is reproduced and defined, since such athletes represent the ideal in contemporary masculinity—a definition which traditionally contrasts with what it means to be gay (Anderson, 2002, 2005a, b; Connell, 1995; Curry, 1991; Messner, 1992).

Additionally, in (2001) Wolf-Wendel, Toma and Morpew used survey data to detail that most American collegiate teamsport athletes (athletes who did not have openly gay teammates) showed little tolerance for gay teammates. The athletes considered homosexuality synonymous with physical weakness and emotional frailty, and the notion of a gay teamsport athlete therefore seemed an oxymoron. Within this context, gay male athletes (historically stigmatized as being feminine) were understood to be weaker and less competitive than their heterosexual male teammates. This was particularly thought true of gay men in teamsports, compared to gay men in individual sports.

Shifting Attitudes on Sexuality and Gender

Although men’s sport has traditionally been understood as a highly homophobic institution, there are several trends that might influence how heterosexual undergraduate athletes construct their views on homosexuality. These cultural changes occur both in and out

of sport. First, since the early 1990s, qualitative and quantitative studies reveal a significant decrease in cultural and institutional homophobia in both intercollegiate athletic and university settings (Widmer, Treas, & Newcomb, 2002). Second, qualitative studies reveal a form of normative masculinity growing more inclusive of feminine gender expression, particularly among college-age, white, middle-class men (Anderson, 2005a, b; 2009a; McCormack, 2010a, b).

It is reasonable to suspect that these changing cultural trends have implications for a sex-gender system that conflates homosexuality with femininity (Pascoe, 2005) and subordinates gay men. For example, Ibson (2002) found increasing cultural homophobia influences heterosexual men to further police their gendered behaviors, while decreasing cultural homophobia has the opposite effect. Accordingly, Anderson (2009a) has contended that as cultural homophobia declines, heterosexual men are more likely to make gay friends (Anderson; 2005a, b; 2009) and even engage in publicly kissing other men in a way that is not threatening to their publicly perceived heterosexual identities (Anderson, Adams & Rivers, 2010). Indeed, Anderson and his colleagues have shown that decreased cultures of homophobia are found among fraternity members (Anderson, 2008b), male rugby players (Anderson & McGuire, 2010), school boys (McCormack & Anderson, 2010a, b), heterosexual male cheerleaders (Anderson, 2008a), and even the men of a Catholic College soccer team in the Midwest (Anderson, forthcoming). More recently, McCormack (2010a) shows that among English high school students at three different schools (lower, middle and upper-middle class), young men express physical tactility, and that homophobia (including homophobic discourse) is stigmatized.

While these studies only point to positive developments in the organization and stratification of men in these particular sport teams, Anderson argues that homophobia is

decreasing (although not uniformly) in educationally-based sporting teams more broadly. Evidencing this, in over a dozen ethnographic investigations of undergraduate sport teams, spread across both the United States and the United Kingdom, he found that attitudes toward homosexuality were positive among heterosexual teammates, even though heterosexism often persisted (2009a). These ethnographic findings are supported through quantitative data sets, including *General Social Survey* in the United States, and the *British Survey of Social Attitudes* in the United Kingdom (Anderson, 2009a). Showing quantitative support of decreasing homophobia among team sport athletes particularly, Southall et al. (2009) used questionnaires among the athletes of three Division 1 universities in the deep American South. They found that less than a quarter of athletes had some reservation about sharing sporting spaces with gay men. This changing cultural landscape has meant that today's openly gay athletes have much better experiences than those only a few years ago.

In his most recent research on openly gay high school and university athletes, Anderson (2011) shows that more team sport athletes (as compared to individual sport athletes) are coming out of the closet in America than in his prior (2002) study. Furthermore, unlike in previous studies, openly gay players reported that their teammates celebrated their sexuality, instead of silencing it. This speaks to declining homophobia among many local youth cultures in educationally based settings (McCormack, 2010a; McCormack & Anderson, 2010a, b; Savin-Williams, 2005), particularly in the U.K. (Ripley et al., 2011). Thus, while the 1980s were characterized by extreme homophobia, and the 1990s began to see a crack in this hegemonic stigmatization, evidence from the early to mid-2000s showed that young men were rapidly losing their homophobia. Anderson's most recent research into the experiences of openly gay athletes (2011), alongside a plethora of other ethnographic and

quantitative research studies (2009a), shows that while declining homophobia may be an uneven social process, it is nonetheless a cultural trend in Western countries.

Theorizing Masculinities

The trend toward decreasing levels of homophobia corresponds with the need to re-examine the theories used to understand its relationship to masculinities. Inclusive masculinity theory (Anderson, 2009a) situates masculinity in an historical context. Defining “homophobia” as the fear men maintain of being socially perceived as gay, we argue that in periods of high homophobia boys and men are compelled to (a) express homophobic and sexist attitudes, (b) raise their masculine capital through sport and muscularity, (c) raise their heterosexual capital through sexually objectifying women and (d) avoid emotional intimacy or homosocial tactility. All of this is to escape the stigma of being considered gay (Anderson, 2008c). It is within this cultural context that Kimmel suggests homophobia *is* masculinity (1994).

Thus, in cultural moments of high homophobia, masculinity is predicted to exist in a hierarchal capacity, with whatever form of masculinity is most associated with heterosexuality residing on top, and all others being stratified below. In this zeitgeist, masculinities most associated with femininity or homosexuality will be marginalized in a process that Connell (1995) defines as hegemonic masculinity.

However, inclusive masculinity theory maintains that as homophobia declines, multiple masculinities can be *equally* esteemed (Anderson, 2005b). Not only will multiple masculinities co-exist harmoniously, but fewer behaviors are associated with homosexuality. In inclusive settings (with low homophobia), heterosexual boys and men are permitted to engage in an increasing range of behaviors without threat to their publicly perceived heterosexual identities (Anderson, Adams, & Rivers, 2010). Thus, inclusive masculinity

theory is an adaptable heuristic tool, and it is able to explain the social dynamics of masculinities in times of low homophobia.

In the explication of inclusive masculinity theory, Anderson (2009a) theorizes that the cultural shift of White youth in educational settings, from homophobia to a stigmatization of homophobia, was due to multiple influences: the Internet, the media, decreasing cultural religiosity, the success of feminism, the success of gay and lesbian social politics, and the influence of the increased number of gay and lesbians coming out of the closet. All of these factors have combined to make White male youth in educationally-based settings much more inclusive of male homosexuality. Interestingly, these changes frequently occurred against the desires of their coaches or other influential males (Adams, Anderson & McCormack, 2010; Anderson & McGuire, 2010; McCormack and Anderson, 2010b).

Strength of Sporting Identities

Thus far, we have argued that homophobia has decreased over time and that alternative ways of conceptualizing masculinity are now appropriate. What has not been examined, however, is whether the strength of one's sporting identity strength influences perspectives on gay men in sport. In sport, youth learn early that questioning or contesting authority has serious consequences (de-selection and/or marginalization). Should athletes fail to adhere to a coach's request, or even align his views with those of the coach, he can lose playing time, be socially ostracized and mocked in front of our friends/teammate (Anderson, 2010).

Hughes and Coakley (1991) describe this as a type of over-conformity, noting that "the likelihood of being chosen or sponsored for continued participation is increased if athletes over conform to the norms of sport" (p. 311). Homophobia has been a central element of this over-conformity. Accordingly, we theorize that athletes centred on their

athletic progression might over-conform to a coach's sporting ethic of homophobia. Thus, building upon Hughes and Coakley's over-conformity theory, in this research rather than examining for differences between team and individual sport athletes, we instead look to examine whether the strength of one's conformity to the identity of athlete is associated with elevated homophobia.

Current Study

The purpose of the current study was to measure men teamsport participants' self-reported attitudes toward gay male athletes in their sporting spaces and to explore the potential role that a strong athletic identity played in this process. The data reported in this article are part of a larger-scale survey-based investigation of University students' attitudes towards a variety of sport-related issues. However, for the purpose of this article we only discuss attitudes related to gay men in sport. Based on the theoretical framework, we predicted:

Hypothesis 1: Persons exiting the university will have more favorable attitudes than persons starting university.

Hypothesis 2: Persons with weak athletic identifies will have more favorable attitudes toward homosexuality than persons with strongly athletic identifies.

Hypothesis 3: Year of study and athletic identity will interact to predict attitudes toward homosexuality, such that strongly identified first year students will have the least favorable attitudes toward homosexuality.

Method

Participants

The study was conducted at a top-ten, British university known for its sporting accomplishments. All students ($N = 216$ males) who completed the survey were enrolled in

an undergraduate sport-related university degree. Almost all of the men in this study are White, a figure consistent with university data showing that 94% of the students are White. The remaining 6% tend to be graduate students from other countries who do not play competitive sport. This is important because past researchers have suggested that a history of racial discrimination and hyper-religiosity have cultivated higher rates of homophobia among non-whites (Anderson & McCormack, 2010; McCormack & Anderson, 2010a, b). For example, Southall et al. (2011) have found significantly elevated rates of homophobia among Black men in sport, compared to White. We did not collect other demographic information, and we recognize the potential limitation of doing so.

Survey and Procedures

Groups of athletes were surveyed either on the first day of their freshman year at university or during the final week of their final year. This was so that we were able to examine student attitudes prior to experiencing the university setting *and* upon completion of the university experience. In order to ensure subject confidentiality, no coaches were present at any time during the survey's administration. For first year students, it was administered during an orientation meeting conducted within each academic program. For final year students it was administered during scheduled classes.

As mentioned above, a large-scale survey was developed containing questions designed to gather demographic (e.g. gender and sport participation), attitudinal (e.g., attitudes towards sexuality and other socio-positive and socio-negative issues related to sport), and identity-related (i.e., did students consider themselves first and foremost as “athletes”) information. Drawing upon Anderson's (2002, 2005a, 2005b) theoretical framework, the larger survey contained questions specifically designed to uncover subjects' hypermasculine attitudes, as well as levels of homosociality in college-sport cultures. Our

questions were designed to involve realistic hypothetical situations common to teams within a university athletic department, as well as assessing strength of athletic identity.

Identity is a multidimensional view of oneself that is both enduring and dynamic. Although influenced by social and environmental factors, the identity hierarchy is fairly stable. Nevertheless, one's identity should not be viewed as a static entity, and any measure used to indicate athletic identity should take into account the future goals of the participants. A strong identity necessarily leads to a narrowing of some roles, resulting in the existence of a dominant identity (Lally, 2007). In the athletic context, the work of Brewer et al. (1993) (i.e., the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale) and Prus (1984) (i.e., the Career Contingency Model) has been salient in developing an understanding of identity. Invoking these models, three open questions were developed for this survey. The first question was a 'snapshot' of the present day on how they would define their identity ('inward gaze'), the second question was how an onlooker would describe them ('outward gaze'), and thirdly, where their aspirations for the future lay ('forward gaze'). Specifically the three open questions were: "Please describe your identity (not your name), i.e. who are you?" "When other people are describing you, they might say: "You know John or Sally, he/she is?" and "What are your 3 highest personal goals in life?"

This study embraces the notion that our participants develop their dominant identity over time and construct self-narratives that enlighten the "process of becoming" (Carless & Douglas, 2009, p.53). It can be inferred that participants who articulated a sport participation oriented response to the inward, outward and forward gaze questions possess a self-concept that centralizes athletic endeavors in their current and future narrative structure. As such, these participants were defined as possessing a stronger athletic identity than those who

articulated a range of other responses to the questions (such as career, academic, and relationship).

We then used four items from the survey that focused on the athletes' attitudes to homosexuality: "I think that gay men should not be allowed to change in the locker room with straight men," "I would be uncomfortable having a gay athlete on my team," "I think that a gay coach should not be allowed to coach heterosexual male athletes," "If I had a gay teammate, I would support their (sic) coming out to the whole team." Participants responded to each of these items on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). The fourth question was reversed and it should therefore be noted throughout the paper that higher scores on each item indicated less homophobic attitudes. The scale demonstrated acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .83$).

Results

We first computed means and standard deviations. The mean attitude toward homosexuality in sport score for the entire sample was 4.22 ($SD = .79$). Remembering that higher scores are reflective of more positive attitudes, this mean score is reflective of positive attitude towards homosexuality in the sample as a whole.

We tested our hypotheses through a 2 (year: entry or exit) \times 2 (athletic identity: weak or strong) analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the data. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, results identified a significant main effect ($F = 4.85$; $p < .03$) for year, with those entering their first year of study ($n = 128$, $M = 4.18$, $SD = .78$) adopting significantly more negative attitudes than those in their final year of study ($n = 88$, $M = 4.47$, $SD = .85$). No significant main effect ($F = 0.03$; $p = .88$) was identified for athletic identity, as strongly identified ($n = 68$, $M = 4.40$, $SD = .41$) and weakly identified ($n = 148$, $M = 4.35$, $SD = .67$) persons held similar attitudes. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

These results were qualified, however, by a significant effect year \times athletic identity interaction ($F = 3.09$; $p < .05$). As shown in Figure 1, those with a stronger athletic identity entered their university education with more negative attitudes towards homosexuality. These attitudes seem to undertake a significant shift because those with strong athletic identities who are leaving education had much more positive attitudes. This was not the case for those with weaker athletic identities who appeared to enter education with more positive attitudes and to exit with a similar attitude. The pattern is supportive of Hypothesis 3.

Discussion

Whereas previous studies have found male college/university-sport cultures to be a bastion of cultural and institutional homophobia and representative of notions of hegemonic contemporary masculinity (Clarke, 1998; Curry, 1991; Griffin, 1998; Hekma, 1998; Messner, 1992; Pronger, 1990), this research did not. Instead, this research supports Anderson's (2005a, 2009a, 2011) contention that orthodox notions of heterosexual masculinity, which included compulsory attitudes of homophobia (Kimmel, 1994), no longer exist uniformly among undergraduate men. Instead of there being no room for gays in the sporting field, gays are—at least theoretically welcomed—among these White, middle class youth at this university known for its sporting prowess.

These results reflect Anderson's (2011) study of openly gay American athletes, finding increasingly positive stories of openly gay athletes when they do compete in sport. In his most recent research on the experience of 26 openly gay high school and university athletes (all of whom disclosed their sexual orientation between 2008 and 2010), he found that gay athletes had better experiences than those in the 2002 cohort of openly gay athletes. He also observed that openly gay athletes who choose to come out today experience less heterosexism among their teammates, and that they also maintain better support. Instead of

silencing their sexual identities, teammates used it as a source of pride. Anderson even found that openly gay athletes suggest that it further bonds them to their teammates.

Whereas it was once theorized (Griffin, 1998) and found (Anderson, 2000, 2002, 2005a) that team sport athletes might maintain higher levels of homophobia than individual sport athletes, this is not borne out with this research situated in the UK: homophobia was very low upon entering the university (aged 18) regardless of the sport played. This is confirmed by other research on an openly gay rugby player at this same university (Anderson & McGuire, 2010), and through ethnographic work of this university's men's soccer team (Adams, Anderson & McCormack, 2010) as well a seven year-long ethnographic study on two other teams (Anderson, McCormack & Lee, forthcoming). In these studies, heterosexual teammates are shown to reject the homophobia and even hypermasculinity of their coaches. Thus, this research helps situate what these other studies have found—that increasingly homophobia is an issue mostly of coaches, not athletes.

While the type of sport one plays does not appear to be associated with homophobia upon entering the university, it does appear that the strength of one's identity as an athlete is of concern. While all athletes exited the university with strongly supportive views of gay men in sport, those indicating a stronger athletic identity upon entering university maintain some (very limited) homophobia. Thus, their university experience is associated with upgrading their views on gay men in sport.

Accordingly, one implication of this research is that it highlights the need for coaches to interrogate the traditions of their trade. Bush and Silk (2010) argue that the focus on winning has led to a narrow and blinkered conception of what sports coaching is, for both academics and practitioners. It is the adoption and application of this inadequate conception of coaching that promulgates the homophobia and hypermasculinity of coaches. Thus,

reconceptualizing sports coaching to move beyond the performance agenda and articulate the multiple identities of a coach is essential in ensuring that coaches not only accept, but fully embrace, the diverse athletic populations with which they work.

This research should help dismantle long-held cultural stereotypes that undergraduate, heterosexual male athletes are hyper-macho, homophobic, jocks. It supports Anderson's (2005b, 2009a) contentions (a) that the type of hegemonic masculinity that dominated youth settings throughout the 1980s and early 1990s has been replaced by a more inclusive heterosexual male (b) that it is no longer appropriate to assume homophobia based off of one's sporting locale (c) and that while teamsports used to be bastions of orthodox masculinity, on at least this one variable (homophobia), we must also problematize this assumption. However, it is important to note that these findings do not suggest that all athletes, in all sports, at all levels or locations would have equally as supportive attitudes as the men in this study. There is a complex web of variables that help determine the level of homophobia of any given local culture: race, class and religious affiliation are important variables. Thus, declining homophobia is an uneven, yet steady social process.

Finally, we highlight that while our research is influenced by the more gay-friendly national culture that the United Kingdom offers, compared to many states/locales in the United States, there is nothing particular about this campus to over-inflate positive attitudes toward gay men. In fact, if Griffin (1998) is correct in supposing that the more a team or institutional culture is focused on winning, the higher the rate of homophobia, it is likely that homophobia will be higher here than at other universities. This is because this university is internationally recognized for its sporting excellence. Thus, results of this research make it clear that it is no longer sociologically responsible to generalize all sports, and all men who play them as homophobic. Increasingly, it appears to be the opposite.

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Figure 1. Interaction between year of study (entry/exit) and athletic identity (stronger/weaker)

