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Men at Sport: Gay Men's Experiences in the Sport Workplace

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Research on sexual identity and sport has revealed a shifting narrative about the experiences of gay men. While some suggest the atmosphere is hostile, others posit that homophobia and sexual prejudice are playing less of a role in gay men's experiences. This research focuses on the experiences of 10 gay men working in professional, collegiate, and club sport, as part of a larger dataset of 37 male and female employees. Five of the men were overtly and publicly out at work, while five were closeted (to varying degrees). This article focuses on three themes for gay men working in sport: 1) the importance of coming out in the workplace; 2) the role of the locker room as a contested terrain, and 3) the disconnect between their experiences at work and their perceptions of the workplace environment as negative or positive. Men in this study were basing their impressions on their total experience in sport (as current and former players, as employees, and as fans). It also suggests that the public "story" of gay men working in sport represents one of two extremes—either the proverbial "horror story," or the extremely positive representation of gay men's experiences. This research suggests that gay men's experiences in sport are more complex and nuanced than the public narrative implies.

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Research on sexual identity and sport has revealed a complex and shifting narrative about the experiences of gay men. While some suggest that the atmosphere for gay men in sport is hostile (Griffin, 1998; Harry, 1995;

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Messner, 1992; Pronger, 1990), more recent research posits that homophobia and sexual prejudice are declining and playing less of a role in the experiences of gay men in sport (Anderson, 2009a, 2011). However, the vast majority of research concerning the intersections of sexuality, gender, and sport has focused solely on the experiences of athletes—whether at the high school (Anderson, 2005), collegiate (Muir & Seitz, 2004; Wolf-Wendel, Toma, & Morpew 2001), or professional levels (Amaechi, 2009; Freeman, 2003).

While there has been some research on the experiences of lesbian coaches (Griffin, 1998; Kauer, 2009), there is a gap in the sport literature about the experiences of sexual minorities involved in the institution in other capacities beyond athletes, such as employees; notable exceptions include Anderson's (2009b) focus on how "sports stakeholders" reinforce gender norms, while Mauer-Starks, Clemmons, and Whalen (2008), focus on gay and lesbian issues for athletic trainers. Yet, although the most visible, athletes are only one segment of a larger overarching institution of sport. This includes sports fans, the industry of sports media and broadcasting, and the hierarchical corporate structure of individual teams, leagues, stadiums, and major events.

This research examines employees of professional, collegiate, and club sports, and focuses on the experiences of 10 gay men as part of a larger dataset of 37 male and female employees. Nearly all participants in the larger dataset—and 9 of the 10 men in this study—had prior experience in sport as athletes; all participants considered themselves sports fans. This cumulative experience of a lifetime of interaction within the institution of sport makes sport employees a unique population.

The lifetime of experiences leads to shared ideologies and values about sport, most notably a "team first" mentality that encourages athletes to put the success of the team over their own individual needs and identity formations. As Wolf-Wendel et al. (2001) suggest, participation in sport, particularly team sport, leads to an emphasis on team and community over individual identity formation. Anderson (2005) calls this a "near-total" institution (based on Goffman's (1962) concept of the total institution) that operates as a closed loop, reinforcing the same ideologies from the youth level through the professional level.

Goffman (1962) identified five types of total institutions, including "those established to pursue worklike tasks and who justify themselves only on these instrumental grounds (e.g. the military), and those established as retreats from the world (e.g., monasteries)" (p. 16). Atkinson and Young (2008) argue that both are applicable to sport organizations. Sport acts as a retreat from the "real world," and, in doing so, carries elements of a total institution.

While sport does not represent a pure Goffmanian "total institution," it still carries with it elements of the type of institution Goffman

(1962) described, particularly the blending of spheres between work and home/social life. In addition, the mechanisms by which athletes participate and engage with the institution of sport (and by which those with competing or contesting ideologies drop out of the institution altogether) perpetuate problematic gender and sexual ideologies, particularly in men's team sports (Anderson 2009b). The level of control of the institution of sport, the closed loop mechanism of reproducing sport ideologies, and the lifetime accumulation of experiences in sport all make the gay sport employee a unique subject.

PREVIOUS LITERATURE

Virtually all of the literature on homophobia in sport focuses on the experiences of athletes. Groundbreaking work by Anderson (2002), Caudwell (1999), Cahn (1994), Griffin (1992, 1998), and Woog (1998, 2002) highlight the negative impact of homophobia on all athletes, both gay and straight. Messner (1992) describes sport as a space that reproduces heteronormativity and gender norms (especially for boys and men) vis à vis homophobia. Clarke (1998) notes that sport has been regarded "as the area for boys to learn how to be 'real' (heterosexual) men . . . Thus it is (heterosexual) men who . . . have the power to define what counts as legitimate . . . Legitimacy is the embodiment and celebration of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity" (p. 149).

The past two decades of work on sport, gender, and sexuality has reiterated the theme of sports as a space that reifies and reproduces heteronormativity, gender norms, and a masculinity that is valued above other forms of masculinity—what Connell (1987) calls hegemonic masculinity. While athletes are not the focus of this project, the experiences of gay athletes provide a backdrop for an analysis of the experiences of gay sport employees.

A common excuse for lesbian and gay professional athletes staying in the closet is the "image problem" for women (Griffin, 1998, 1999) and the assumption of heterosexuality for men (Messner, 1992). Related to both of these ideas is the "athlete-as-role-model" argument, which suggests that the stigma of homosexuality keeps athletes closeted for fear of losing endorsement deals and social acceptance (essentially that athletes have an economic incentive to stay in the closet). However, if employees also feel that they have to remain in the closet, or if they have negative experiences based on sexual identity at work, this says something larger about the institution of sport as a whole. It might point to the fact that sport, at an institutional level, discourages open or progressive dialogue around issues of sexual identity in both active and passive ways. The role model suggestion or the economic

incentive argument may very well be masking the fact that the institution of sport actively restricts open sexual identity formation of *all* sexual minority individuals involved in sport; this may suggest that repression of non-heteronormative behavior is a *feature* of organized sport. Historically, sport has shown that it has a stake in maintaining hegemonic gender and sexual identity ideologies (Anderson, 2009b; D. Plummer, 2006).

While there has been less attention to other sport employees in scholarly literature, there has been some mass media attention focused on issues of sexual identity in sport for non-athletes. In 1999, the online community OutSports was launched (Ziegler & Buzinski, 2007), catering to gay sports fans. They provide articles, columns, message forums, and resources for gay athletes, employees, and sports fans. OutSports has also profiled several out employees, including gay coaches, trainers, and front office employees. Other media outlets have followed. ESPN has covered the coming out of an openly gay NCAA coach (Garber, 2007) and an NFL athletic trainer (Bull, 2004). *The Advocate* covered the coming out of a gay former baseball umpire (Hoffman, 2002). This mass media attention on employees has primarily, although not exclusively, covered the experiences of gay men in sport.

Finally, there is a body of literature that focuses on employment discrimination toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals (but does not specifically focus on sport employment). Notably, Chung (2001) proposes an important three-dimensional model for understanding workplace discrimination. His analysis is critical because it provides depth to the concept of discrimination—individuals do not experience discrimination in a linear, clear-cut fashion. Intent, perception, and action all matter to both the measurement and the experience of discrimination. Chung distinguishes between *formal* and *informal* discrimination (institutional policy vs. interpersonal dynamics), *potential* and *encountered* discrimination (possible reactions vs. actual experiences), and *perceived* and *actual* discrimination. Perceived discrimination is the extent to which an individual determines whether the action of their employer is based on their identity categories. Real discrimination is the actual discriminatory practices within the opportunity structure against gay, lesbian, and bisexual employees. Chung (2001) notes, “people can only react according to their perceptions, so perceived discrimination (as opposed to real discrimination) is the principal factor operating in a person’s decisions regarding coping strategies” (p. 36).

Chung’s (2001) analysis is critical to measuring discrimination. It suggests that empirical data providing percentages of workplace discrimination may be measuring entirely different dimensions of discrimination, thus, problematizing comparisons between studies. Additionally, individual experiences of workplace discrimination can be enacted, encountered, and processed differently based on this complex model. Discrimination can be formal or informal, potential or encountered, and perceived or actual—and

any combination of these factors. Therefore, the strategies utilized by gay or sexual minority employees can differ wildly based on each individual experience and interpretation of discrimination.

The most recent literature on anti-gay workplace discrimination suggests that there has been progress, although the changes are not completely straightforward. Giuffre, Dellinger, and Williams (2008) argue that gay men and lesbians are gaining more acceptance in the workplace. However, this acceptance is tempered a bit by what they call an “incomplete” transformation. Their participants, while reporting mostly positive work environments, still “discuss evidence of stereotyping, sexual harassment, and gender discrimination in their work experiences” (p. 255). Although change is occurring, it is an uneven social process.

In both sport and outside culture (McCormack & Anderson 2010; McNair, 2002; Savin-Williams, 2005; Weeks, 2007; Widmer, Treas, & Newcomb, 1998), there appears to be a slow shift away from the firmly entrenched models of sexual prejudice that have defined social interactions and the institution of sport for decades. The most recent evidence suggests that the overwhelmingly homophobic atmosphere in sports is changing. Anderson (2009) argues that “university-attending men are rapidly running from the hegemonic type of masculinity that scholars have been describing for the past 25 years” (p. 4). He describes a shift, particularly among college-aged heterosexual male athletes, away from a culture of homophobia (and what he calls “homohysteria”—the combination of a culture of homophobia, femphobia, and compulsory heterosexuality) and toward more fluidity of sexuality. Anderson argues that these men no longer support homophobic dialogue and discourse in sport, and pass this notion down informally, from incoming class to incoming class. Outside of sport specifically, McCormack (2010) suggests there is a shifting climate among students in the U.K., reporting on declining rates of homohysteria and homophobic behavior. Egan and Sherrill (2009) noted that voters age 18–25 were the least likely to vote for Proposition 8 banning gay marriage in California in 2008. Accordingly, sport appears to be following broader social trends (particularly among the youth) in declining levels of sexual prejudice.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

This project uses a symbolic interaction framework. I focus on how employees interpreted their experiences in the workplace, the subtle and overt messages they used to assess the overall workplace atmosphere, and the cues they used to identify allies at work. I explore how individuals negotiate their understanding of identity and their presentation of their identity in an environment that is sometimes hostile to non-heteronormative sexual behaviors. This process does not necessarily happen in a linear way.

Rather, constructions and performance of identity are often subtle, covert, and nuanced. A symbolic interaction framework helps analyze those subtle processes.

Goffman (1959) examines the ways in which individuals construct meaning in their surroundings and also the ways they choose to present themselves to the world. He suggests that an individual's behavior is divided into front-stage and back-stage performances. Front-stage interaction is the "performance" where individuals present a particular impression of themselves—where aspects of behavior are "expressively accentuated and other aspects, which might discredit the fostered impression, are suppressed" (p. 111). However, there is another region of behavior—the back region, or backstage, "where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course" (p. 112). The backstage is a place where employees can consciously construct identity management techniques, and also where they can step out of the "character" they may be presenting in the front stage region. For employees who may be consciously constructing or manipulating the impressions of others regarding their sexual and work identities, it is useful to think of Goffman's front-stage/back-stage metaphor.

Blumer (1969) notes that the symbolic interaction perspective has three fundamental assumptions, focusing on how people act based on meanings, and how people construct and interpret meanings. Snow (2001) expands on Blumer's fundamental assumptions of the symbolic interaction perspective, suggesting principles of symbolic interaction, including interactive determination and symbolization.

Interactive determination involves the "interactional contexts or webs of relationships in which they are ensnared or embedded" (Snow, 2001, p. 369). As part of this idea, Snow (2001) discusses the idea of anticipatory strategic action. He discusses this idea specifically relating to social movements. "In anticipation of the possibility of negative and repressive responses of external groupings, some movements strategically engage in lines of action aimed at generating a positive public image and securing expanded elbow room in which to operate" (p. 369). In this research, I examine how employees perceive the sport environment, and how their actions are impacted by their perceptions. At times, their behaviors are anticipatory strategic actions based on their impressions of sport for sexual minorities.

Snow (2001) also discusses the concept of symbolization. In doing so, he goes beyond Blumer's (1969) suggestion that meanings are interpretive and notes "symbols and the meanings they convey are often, perhaps routinely, embedded in and reflective of existing cultural and organizational contexts and systems of meaning" (p. 371). He suggests that it is more complicated than simply focusing on the negotiation and construction of meaning, but rather that "the issue of meaning and interpretation . . . has both structural and constructionist dimensions" (p. 372). He argues that the

ways in which individuals interpret their social world is at least partially embedded in the structure of institutions.

Finally, I use a social constructivist analysis in interpreting how employees report their perceptions, experiences, and behaviors in the workplace. I rely on West and Zimmerman's (1987) notion of "doing gender." I focus on how they "do sexuality"—the ways in which they perform, disclose, and hide their identities while actively constructing meaning for themselves in a social context.

Using the symbolic interaction perspective along with a social constructivist approach, this research explores the subtle processes and experiences of participants to understand the institution of sport as a whole. Symbolic interaction provides a framework to address the research aims of this project, particularly on the ways in which employees create and interpret meaning in their work environment and identify allies at work. Combined with a grounded theory methodological approach, this research dissects the subtle nuances of the sport atmosphere for gay sport employees.

METHODOLOGY

The men who participated in this study were recruited through snowball sampling, network sampling, and, later during data collection, targeted sampling. I used flyers sent to specific teams and leagues, and posted on various message boards targeted towards members of gay communities. I also relied on key informants in my own existing social networks. It was significantly more difficult to recruit gay men working in sport than it was to recruit the lesbians in the larger dataset; gay men were also unable to provide additional participants through snowball sampling. Only two members of the sample were able to refer additional participants, and they were a closed loop where they both (unknowingly) referred each other. This suggests that gay men's networks in sport are either shallower than their lesbian counterparts or more secretive, and possibly that the culture of men's sports creates a space where gay men have less space to behave in ways that go against the dominant ideologies of heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity. As a result, half of the people in the sample for this project were men who were publicly out in various media and targeted specifically for participation.

The fact that gay men working in sport were primarily unable to refer additional participants is particularly important. Workplaces are formal settings—even sport workplaces, which may be more casual in dress and nontraditional in schedule. Workplaces are part of the public sphere, and many consider sexuality to be part of the private sphere (even as women, and particularly women of color, are known to blend the private and public

sphere; Collins, 2000), and even as there appears to be an increasing blend of the public and private spheres in the modern world (K. Plummer, 2003). That alone may have led to participants' reluctance to ask coworkers to participate in this project. The fact that this project also involved sexual identity likely led to further reluctance. For example, one potential (heterosexual) key informant expressed concern that he would have to get the approval of the human resources department before he would be able to post a flyer or circulate an e-mail for me. Additionally, asking coworkers to participate in a project about sexual identity could have identified the participant as gay, and for the half of the sample who were not overtly out at work, this likely led to reluctance to seek out additional participants. One subject wondered whether coming out to a coworker could be construed as sexual harassment. In this overarching context of anxiety around sexuality and the workplace, it makes sense that some participants felt reluctance in referring additional participants.

Once respondents were identified, they participated in face-to-face or telephone semistructured, nondirective interviews that lasted between one and three hours. One participant was unable to commit to a phone interview, and answered questions via e-mail instead. I recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed interviews using a modified grounded theoretical approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I utilized Strauss and Corbin's (1998) process of microanalysis throughout the analysis stage. Microanalysis is defined as "the detailed line-by-line analysis necessary at the beginning of a study to generate initial categories (within their properties and dimensions) and to suggest relationships among categories" (p. 57). Microanalysis allowed me to develop themes regarding the ways in which employees' perceived their work environment and how they utilized strategies for negotiating the work environment. Via microanalysis and open coding, distinct categories developed from the data, which became theoretically saturated after repeated interviews with all of the respondents in the larger dataset. This project focuses specifically on the 10 men who participated in the larger data collection.

LIMITATIONS

While this study suggests certain themes with respect to gay men's experiences in sport as a workplace, there are several limitations to this data. The first, and most significant, is the small sample size. In the original larger data set, I set out to interview approximately equal numbers of gay men and lesbians working in sport. Gay (or bisexual) men proved to be significantly more difficult to recruit than lesbians—I ended up with nearly three lesbians for every gay man in the larger sample. In addition to the difficulty finding gay men to participate, gay men were also significantly less likely

to refer other participants—only two participants could refer any other men, and they (unknowingly) referred each other. This lack of developed social networks for gay men working in sport was commented on by some of the participants. When one participant was publically outed, he told me he got between 60 and 70 e-mails from other gay men working in sports around the country, but nearly all of them were from men who were isolated in their experiences. This makes it difficult to recruit participants for possible participation in a project like this, as they feel they have much to lose by participation.

This leads to the second significant limitation: The men who agreed to participate in this study tended to be more publically out in their workplaces. Men who would reply to a flyer or message board from a stranger (even if I was referred by key informants) tended to fit one of two extremes: the proverbial “horror story” or the extremely positive experience. The fact that half the sample ($n = 5$) was publically out in the media likely skewed the sample, particularly as so many of the media stories about gay men in sport tend to reinforce negative experiences. Finally, the lack of diversity in the sample by both race and institution limited the sample. This study exposes the narrative of one particular kind of gay male employee, but is only one narrative among many in the shifting landscape of sport as an institution and as a workplace.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SAMPLE

While I did not restrict the recruitment materials to specific terminology regarding sexual identity, all 10 of the men in this sample self-identified as gay. They represent five different professional leagues, including the National Football League (NFL), National Hockey League (NHL), Major League Baseball (MLB), Major League Soccer (MLS), three different NCAA Division I men's sports, and two club sports. Five men worked in off-field positions (where they had little direct contact with athletes and rarely entered the locker room) and five worked in direct-contact positions. They represented both the most publicly open about their sexual identity and the most closeted and hidden members of the larger dataset. All participants worked in sport for at least two years within the last five years. “Employment” in sport included anyone receiving a regular paycheck (annual salary or while the sport is in season) for their work in sport, excluding volunteer or internship positions or work in youth sport. Nine participants identified as white or Caucasian, and one identified as Hispanic. They ranged in age from 23–68, but the majority of participants ($n = 6$) were between 30 and 39 years of age at the time of interview. Two participants were between 23 and 29, and two participants were older than 50. The average age was 37.8. All participants are identified by pseudonyms.

For confidentiality purposes, I only discuss participants as having “on-field” or “off-field” positions in their specific types of institutions.

RESULTS

The men in this study had experiences that were complex and nuanced, but generally represented one of two extremes. They differed on their level of openness or “outness” at work, and on their perception of their overall workplace experience as positive or negative. Five participants reported positive or neutral workplace experiences, and five reported negative experiences. Five participants identified as “totally closeted” in the workplace, taking active steps to hide their sexual identity, and five identified as out in some degree—not necessarily explicitly out, but not taking steps to hide their sexual identity either. Of those who reported a negative workplace environment, three were closeted and two were out. The men differed in whether they felt being identifiably out was important, their anxieties about the locker room, and the evidence they used to determine their perception of the overall environment.

The Importance of Coming Out

One of the clearest differences between the two groups of men in this study was around the level of importance they placed on coming out or being out at work (in linguistic and active ways as well as in passive ways). Their beliefs varied around whether it was important to be explicitly out. Some felt it was imperative to come out and be out in the sports workplace. Others placed much less importance on this. All 10 of the men demonstrated behaviors that included active and passive strategies to come out, and active and passive strategies to hide their sexual identity or deflect suspicion. Several of the men were very outspoken about their belief that coming out was an important and vital step to improving workplace equality. Steven, an NCAA off-field employee, noted,

I have been extremely frustrated by the . . . the fact that so few people that work on the collegiate level in athletics have been willing to come out of the closet . . . We literally are in every athletic department . . . Everybody knows, but nobody talks about it . . . it's disappointing to me because we are adults and this prevailing attitude that, you know, my job will be destroyed, my life will be destroyed, I won't be able to do this . . . I just don't buy it . . . I'll be quite honest . . . I think it's high time people started to own up to the reality of life I am disappointed that so few people on the collegiate level who, who work at this level and who could have such a positive benefit on the lives around them, and really

be very constructive role models, have been so hesitant to do so. I give all the kudos to those of us, I don't want to sound to self-aggrandizing, to those people who have been willing to put themselves on the line and make these decisions, and good for them . . . but I am disappointed that it's not more people.

Lee, an off-field MLS employee, couldn't fathom why employees would even bother staying in the closet at work. Yet, even among men who considered themselves hypothetically out, some attached less importance to purposefully coming out in the workplace. Seth, a club sport employee, and George, an NHL employee, both adopted a strategy that they would be honest about their sexual identity if asked (an event that rarely occurred), but would not go out of their way to share information. This allowed them to continue to frame their lack of disclosure in passive ways—they weren't out because no one asked them, not because they chose not to come out. George said,

I'm honest about myself and it's just I don't feel the need to like really talk about it because, I guess, it's just kind of weird because when you talk about being gay, it's so closely linked to, well it is, sexuality, and I wouldn't want my straight employees talking about their sex lives or sex in the office . . . So I'm just going to live, and if they ask questions, I'll answer'em.

I asked George, "Have people asked questions ever?" He responded, "No, I mean not working in sports. Um, certainly before that, yes, I've had coworkers that like bugged the crap out of me like and then it was like all right, I'm gay . . ." George expressed no disconnect with this revelation—he continued to maintain that if people were to ask him directly if he were gay, he would tell them, even though no one had asked him at any point while he was working in sport. George personified the ideology made popular by the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy in the U.S. military. He would not disclose his identity unless someone asked him, yet, he acknowledged that the workplace was a setting where it was unlikely he would be asked.

There were also men who came out against their will or who were "outed" by others. Frank and Greg, both NCAA employees, were outed publicly and ultimately experienced the most negative events surrounding their sexual identity at work by being fired. Both had to make decisions about their outing experiences in a context fraught with legal considerations. They expressed frustration with "losing control of the information" of their sexual identity, and either having others disclose their identity for them, or of having to disclose their identity before others found out through the media.

However, the sense of "losing control" of coming out information was an issue even for men who came out voluntarily. John Amaechi, a former closeted gay National Basketball Association player, pointed out in his autobiography (2009) that the only thing he regretted about coming out publicly

was that he lost the ability to control giving the information to those who deserve it. Stephen, an NCAA employee who came out more than a decade ago, noted that he rarely had to do anything to be “out at work” because most of the work was done for him.

I think I started by telling my coworkers, specifically in [my] office, and then once you tell one person, well, you know, it's over . . . [All] it took was word of mouth and most of the work was done for me . . . If their perception is that I'm straight, I correct it. In a lot of ways, the student athletes who are close to me, they do the work with every succeeding freshman class that comes in, they sort of give them the heads up that I'm gay. That way, it doesn't lead to any embarrassing situations and unnecessary comments and whatever, and it leads to a lot more of a comfort situation . . .

Stephen did the work of coming out explicitly to his coworkers and a few student athletes more than a decade ago and today he rarely has to explicitly come out. Even with constant workplace turnover with new athletes, coaches, staff, and coworkers, the “work” of coming out or emphasizing a gay identity is rarely something that has to take place on a day-to-day basis.

The final group of men considered themselves “completely closeted” at work. These men took active measures to hide their sexual identity or pass as heterosexual. For example, before being publicly outed, Frank tried dating women, and he always brought female friends to banquets and events. When I asked Alex, a MLB on-field employee, if he took any steps to conceal his sexual identity, he stated:

Oh, absolutely, absolutely there was. You know, I would obviously go out with the guys, I'd go to clubs, I'd participate in the whole, you know, trying to pick girls up and occasionally I did. That was just to keep everybody away from me. You know, just to put up a front that I didn't want anybody second guessing me. You live in a state of absolute fear, at least I was. I mean I was the fear of being found out was just frightening as heck.

John, an on-field NFL employee, described similar strategies to present a heterosexual image. I asked him if there were any steps he took to consciously stay closeted. He said:

Yeah. I mean, I don't talk about chicks that often. But if I know someone from work is around and we're going out to lunch or something, and I see this hot chick with, you know, big boobs, or a tight pair of jeans on or something, I'll take a couple extra seconds to stare at her. Or, you know, [my coworkers] won't see them, so I'll keep my head watching this girl walking by, just to try and throw them off. So yeah, there's no

question that I do it. I mean, I consciously do it just to try and throw them off.

John and Alex used the most concrete, active strategies to conceal their sexual identity. The other respondents relied on more passive techniques or openly discussed their sexual identity with coworkers.

Half of the men, both closeted ($n = 3$) and out ($n = 2$), described scenarios where working in sport trumped any potential drawback around their sexuality—whether those drawbacks were negative experiences, coming out decisions, or even staying closeted. For them, their identity in sport (as former athletes and as current employees) overrode their identity as sexual minorities. John and Marcus, both on-field NFL employees, stated that working in football at the professional level was the pinnacle in their industry. They were not willing to risk losing out on the opportunity to work in the NFL, especially where their employment was so precariously tied to the performance of the team. The men who discussed this concept couched their beliefs in language about not wanting to distract the team; or, as club employee Curtis discussed, not wanting to “shift the focus” away from sport towards his sexuality. For these men, the focus was sport and the performance of the team. At times, this perspective came at the expense of their own positive experiences in the workplace.

The Role of the Locker Room

Five men in the study discussed interactions that occurred in the locker room, or anxiety around hypothetical locker room issues. This anxiety dictated how open (or out) the men felt they could be, as well as influencing their perceptions of the workplace environment. Four of these men were on-field employees, and one was an off-field employee. For men who work in on-field positions, especially, the locker room is fraught with potential problems around sexual identity issues. John, an NFL employee, felt that if he worked in an off-field position (in sport), his decision to come out might be easier (and his hypothetical experiences with being out could be positive).

. . . Because you're in the locker room, you know? You have to deal with these players day in and day out. Then [the players] start to wonder, are they looking at me? Is he hitting on me? Whereas, you're hardly ever going to see an accountant walking through the locker room. You're never going to see a ticket guy walking through the locker room . . . Otherwise, to me it's just another job, because there aren't many jobs where you have to see people naked . . . And there aren't many people that have to deal with that. Fortunately or unfortunately for me, I've got

one of them. So, depends who you ask. I mean, I love my job, and heck, for me, maybe that's a perk! You know? I get to see these hot guys . . .

John illustrated the issue that many of the “not out” on-field employees discussed. He argued that the locker room presented unique challenges for gay employees. Curry (1991) found that the culture of the locker room in big-time men's team sport included sexist and homophobic language as a central feature. He noted that while not all athletes and coaches participated in such language, “no one ever publically challenged the dominant sexism and homophobia of the locker room” (p. 133). The locker room is a site that Curry calls “a bastion of privilege and a center of fraternal bonding” (p. 119). Gay athletes and gay employees likely experience their locker room anxieties for different reasons, but the employees in this study who discussed the locker room noted an omnipresent concern with the locker room.

For these men, there were significant perceptions of the myth that links homosexuality to predatory sexual behavior. Along with other closeted on-field employees, they reported being very aware of the locker room factor—and took precautions to not give the appearance of impropriety. Frank, an NCAA employee, purposely spent as little time in the locker room as possible. Greg, an NCAA off-field employee (with prior experience in on-field positions), discussed his awareness of the potential for the appearance of impropriety.

[The locker room] was one of my fears that if a parent of one my players found out that I was gay, the question is gonna be, “Is he in the locker room when you guys are changing, or is he in the locker room when you guys are showering, has he ever hugged you or touched you inappropriately or said anything?” So I was very cognizant of that and, I wouldn't say I was in fear of that, but it was always in the back of my mind, like, don't put yourself in a compromising position, that if somebody found out it would look bad.

As John stated above, rarely do gay employees in fields outside of sport have to be conscious of nudity—their own or that of other, presumed heterosexual, coworkers and athletes. For these employees, an awareness of this unique situation dictated how open they felt they could be in the workplace.

Yet, for other employees, they came out *specifically* because of the stereotype of predatory behavior. Steven reports the following about his exchange with a college student athlete,

[The student said] I know we give you a lot of crap from time to time, but, I hope you know that you are a real role model to the people on our team and we look up to you and we respect you and because you're totally honest with us, we know that we have nothing to fear. I've had

kids say if you were single and you were your age and you were still hiding in the closet, and you worked with us on a day to day basis, we would more likely to be far more fearful of you or suspect of your motives, and because you are out, and honest, we don't have to worry about that . . . we don't have to worry about what you're thinking or not thinking because we know what you're thinking . . . and we respect that honesty.

Steven is illustrating what many of the on-field employees discussed—an awareness of the delicacies of the locker room situation in sport. Whether employees used the stereotypes and potential issues to stay closeted or come out differed, but many noted an awareness of the potential difficulties.

Perceptions versus Experiences

Finally, the men in this sample represented two extremes in their perceptions of sport as a workplace—half of the sample felt sport was a hostile space with low acceptance of sexual minorities, and half held more neutral or positive views about the sport workplace. Yet, only three employees had overtly negative *experiences* about their sexual identity—Frank and Greg, who both experienced being fired presumably for their sexual identity, and Marcus, who experienced harassment at the hands of some of the players. Greg's experience did not occur while he was employed in the NCAA, but rather in his prior on-field experience at the high-school level (which then impacted his perception of sport overall). He described a situation where he was forced out of his position and threatened with making his sexuality public based on materials the school discovered in his e-mail. Frank came out publicly, and then was subsequently told he was fired from his on-field position because of his poor performance in the position. Neither man could *definitively* say their sexual orientation was the cause of their firing, but both suspected strongly that this was the main reason for their loss of employment.

Marcus experienced negative comments and gestures by some players in the NFL. He did not report these to management during his career, and stressed to me that this was just a small part of his experience working in professional sport. Ironically, Marcus was one of the few employees who did have a negative experience around their sexual identity, but yet his perception of the atmosphere of sport was more neutral than negative.

Greg, Frank, and Marcus were the minority in this sample. The vast majority of participants had neutral or even positive workplace experiences around sexual identity, but their actual perceptions about the atmosphere were still framed in ways that were generally slightly to overtly negative. This is best illustrated by John's experience.

John, who works in an on-field position in the NFL, repeatedly told me throughout the interview that his workplace was extremely negative, evenly

hostile for gay men. He described the environment as “really conservative. Really, really conservative,” with objectification of women and explicit negative comments made about gay men. When he contemplated what might happen if a player discovered he was gay, he said:

I mean I already knew I would never come out in front of the team, or to a team . . . I'd like to do it maybe to one player, and I've thought about it before . . . I'm very very selective as to who I come out with, I'm not going to go into work with a rainbow shirt on or something. You know? So, I don't think I'd . . . I'd probably get out of there alive . . . but probably no other player would ever talk to me again, I'm guessing.

John felt that the best he could hope for from a coming out disclosure was “getting out of there alive.” He repeatedly stated throughout the interview that he could not come out at work. Yet, John actually had come out to approximately fifteen people throughout his time working in the NFL, and he was received positively each time. Accordingly, John's perception that there was “no way” he could come out at work did not match up with his actual experiences in coming out. Like other participants, John was basing his perception of the atmosphere on hypothetical scenarios, even in the face of contradictory evidence from his experiences.

Some of this can be explained by the role of the media. Nearly half of the negative events in the larger dataset of both men and women were from people who are publicly out in the media (three of the seven total people with negative experiences were publicly out, and three of the six publicly out people reported negative experiences). The relative paucity of mass media stories about gay employees in sport only serves to reinforce the fact that the atmosphere is a negative one, especially if the stories we hear about are ones where egregious cases of discrimination occurred for gay employees.

However, this disconnect between perceptions and experiences was not exclusive to employees who framed their workplaces negatively even as their experiences belied that designation. Even employees who had positive experiences at work and positive perceptions of their workplaces expressed the sense that they were the exceptions to the rule. Curtis noted that his lack of negative consequences around his sexual identity at work made him “really fortunate.” Steven said it was “astonishing” how few negative consequences he experienced for being publicly out about his gay identity. Toward the end of the interview, he noted how his experience was an exception for gay men in sport. However, this belief, the sense that positive experiences are the exception, is the opposite of the reality of these gay employees' actual experiences in the workplace.

DISCUSSION

Given that most of the employees' negative perceptions of their workplace atmosphere are based on their own fears or assumptions about what "could" happen rather than actual experiences, it is reasonable to assume that these perceptions are based on the accumulation of their entire experience in sports throughout their life course—as athletes and as employees. Many of the employees went through a coming out process in late adolescence and early adulthood, often during the time they were actively competing as athletes. This process shaped their entire relationship with the institution of sport—occasionally in affirmative ways, but primarily in negative ones—and had little correlation with the age of the employee. As they transitioned out of roles as athletes into roles as employees, they carried with them the accumulated baggage of their experiences in sport. This is a unique experience for those working in sport's ancillary occupations. As the overwhelming majority of employees in sport have prior athletic experience, it is difficult to distinguish the extent to which those athletic experiences framed their perspective on the sport workplace. These employees did not enter the workplace with a "clean slate" to interpret and analyze their workplace experiences.

Whether or not their sense of atmosphere is based on actual or hypothetical events is less important than the fact that, for these employees, their perception *is* their reality. This reality shapes their decision making at work—in terms of the specific strategies they employ and the people they identify as allies and potential foes. This reality shaped the way they "did sexuality," by managing their behaviors through their interpretation of their environment. While their fears may be, as Alex noted during his interview, "based on nothing," many are unwilling to risk the potential negative consequences of coming out during their tenure in sport. While the justifications for fears of repercussion are perhaps not based in reality, the fear itself still feels real, and employees act on that fear to protect themselves.

It is significant that employee perceptions of the sport atmosphere were not overly negative. While they tended to report subtle negative undertones to their perceptions, this was far from the hostile environment and overtly negative atmosphere that scholars had been reporting for decades (Messner, 1992; Pronger, 1990). While movement toward a more positive environment may be a recent emergence, it is likely that these previous studies are reporting on *perceived* environment rather than *actual* experiences. Like Snow (2001) suggested, these employees were relying on anticipatory strategic action to navigate the sport workplace. This gap between perceptions and experience is one of the more important findings of this research. It suggests that any social change around sexual identity issues in sport has to be part of an overarching, holistic process that goes beyond mere formal changes.

We need more than nondiscrimination policies; to affect positive emotional responses to the workplace environment we need to foster a culture of celebration of sexual diversity.

My findings suggest that the informal actions—the nuanced processes by which individuals navigate sport as an institution—tell a more significant and accurate narrative about sport than the notion that sport is a hostile space for sexual minorities (Griffin, 1998; Harry, 1995; Messner, 1992; Pronger, 1990). By using the symbolic interaction framework to analyze how employees construct meaning and interpret the workplace environment, I am able to illustrate a detailed narrative about the experiences of gay men working in sport. It is not enough to focus on formal policies, or solely on employee perceptions—focusing on actual experiences along with the ways in which employees interact with both informal and formal mechanisms tells a larger and broader story about sport—one that reveals pockets of empowerment and agency for gay sport employees even in the confines of potentially limiting structural constraints.

As participants described their perceptions, experiences, and behaviors at work, they rarely discussed sport with terminology that suggested an awareness of the power of the institution. They outlined what they saw were features of sport employment, and they discussed norms and values stemming from their participation as athletes, but rarely referred to sport as anything but a workplace. Yet, it is precisely the institutional nature of sport that creates the setting for their anticipatory strategic actions at work, and creates the setting for their perceptions of a negative environment even as their experiences tell a different story. The power of the institutional nature of sport was likely masked by its presence in the front stage for these employees. As a more formal workplace setting, employees were able to compartmentalize their experiences as separate from their private life (their backstage), and focus on the specific tasks they were asked to perform as a function of their job.

The sport workplace is not necessarily a welcoming or affirming environment just yet. However, experiences of explicit hostility are becoming increasingly rare. Participants still expressed hesitancy in their status as gay employees, often emphasizing their sport identity as their master identity. Furthermore, they still perceive an environment that is not accepting of sexual minorities, even if their experiences belie those perceptions. This reflects a larger ideological underpinning of sport as an institution, which will take some time to change. The marked distinction between groups of gay male employees in their perceptions, experiences, and strategies at work, however, imply that the institution is already in the process of that social change, ultimately leading to a more open and affirming experience for all sexual minorities in sport.

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