

Original Paper

American College Football and Homophobia: An Empirical Study

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Abstract

This study examines how male hegemony in team sports, such as football, promote homophobia as a form of symbolic violence and a powerful mechanism of social control. The research included the survey administration of the Attitudes Toward Gay Men (ATG) scale (Herek, 1984, 1994) to one Division I college football team on the west coast of the United States, measuring participants' relative levels of homophobia. Findings indicate that approximately two-thirds (n=65) of the members of this college football team reported a positive attitude towards homosexuality within this study, while roughly one-third of respondents had negative attitudes toward gay men. Level of religious faith, regardless of denomination, was the best predictor of participants' attitudes toward homosexuality. Finally, the article discusses the study's limitations, directions for future research and implications to enhance a more open and inclusive climate within American college football.

Keywords

Homophobia, Hegemonic Masculinity, American College Football

1. Introduction

As a former football student athlete at the University of California, Berkeley, a Division 1A program in the Pacific-12 athletic conference, Jake Ashton, the first author on this paper, witnessed several incidents that helped inspire this research project. In his final season with this college football team, he was also pursuing his Master of Arts (M.A.) in the Graduate School of Education, where he studied the Cultural Studies of Sport in Education (CSSE) as his M.A. concentration. During his graduate course of study, Jake learned several terms he had not previously known, such as hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Kessler et al., 1982), heteronormativity (Anderson & McCormack, 2018; Lenskyj, 2013) and compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 2007; Richardson, 2010). He was interested in the connection of these concepts with homophobia in sports (Messner, 1992, 2011; Messner & Sabo, 1990; Nyland, 2004). From a more progressive perspective, however, the expression

of hegemonic masculinity and homophobia in male sports could also be challenged by the emerging articulation of more inclusive forms of masculinity (Adams & Anderson, 2012; Anderson, 2009; Anderson & McCormack, 2018).

Jake also read Mahiri and Van Rheenen's *Out of Bounds: When Athletes Become Scholars*, a book that examines the trajectories of six young men and women as they navigate the intersections of school, sport, and a diverse—at times competing—collection of social identities. In one of the narratives, Derek Van Rheenen, the second author of this paper, returned to graduate school and grappled with his emerging sexual identity as a former elite college and professional soccer player: "his return to the academy to become a scholar was also about becoming more comfortable with his sexual identity...he came to understand that there are many masculinities and that the notion of gender and sexuality are far more porous social categories than rigid understandings of being male or female, gay or straight" (2010, pp. 47-48). As a straight, open-minded college football player, Jake was interested in studying his own sporting culture and the way in which young men are socialized in the sport of American football.

As a young man who had participated in Pop Warner football, as well as high school and college football, Jake had been a part of an athletic culture with its subtle and not so subtle ideological messaging about what it meant to be a man in this sports context. He also witnessed first-hand the ways in which boys and men police one another in and out of the locker room. It is within these athletic and social contexts that boys and young men construct a hyper-masculine identity, sizing up one another through a discursive repertoire of male bravado—announcing one's heterosexual exploits while engaging in both homoerotic and homophobic banter with teammates. Those exhibiting actions or behaviors falling outside of the strict confines of this hyper-masculine and compulsory heterosexual identity are often demeaned as "pussies" or "gay", derogatory references to the "feminine" or an oppositional identity to the culture's socially sanctioned hegemonic masculinity.

The butt of the homophobic joke or slur is often a weaker or lower status male on the team, simultaneously putting him in his hierarchical place while policing the rest of the homo-social group by defining acceptable and unacceptable boundaries of behavior. Bourdieu's (2001) concept of symbolic violence, in his work on *Masculine Domination*, recognizes this violence as a form of ideological domination, by which individuals are oppressed through their own complicity and/or silence. That is, symbolic violence operates covertly and discreetly to promote the marginalization of certain individuals or groups of individuals.

Homosexuality and corresponding expressions of homophobia have been lurking beneath the surface with this Division I football team for the past several years. In 2017, an active member of the university's football roster was kicked off the team for making incendiary and homophobic comments that he posted to his Snapchat account one evening. The player filmed himself in a series of videos ranting about homosexuality as a social disease. In his spliced and expletive-laced tirade of 3 minutes and 17 seconds, the football player asserts that "fags" and "queers" should "kill themselves" to rid the world of their existence. A viewer who watched this player's Snapchat video recorded its content and

uploaded it to Youtube at 3AM the following morning. Within three hours of the early morning, the video had gone viral, receiving nearly 4,000 views.

The player's position coach was informed of the Youtube video later that morning and soon thereafter, all remnants of the Youtube video had been removed from circulation. The football program acted swiftly once they knew of the incident, informing the athletic department of their player's public indiscretion. The University's athletic department also acted quickly so as to avoid a potential scandal, questioning the department's image and unwritten code of conduct expected of staff and the student athletes representing the university in athletic competition. The homophobic content on Youtube was removed soon thereafter.

Directly following the incident, the athletic department suspended the player from the team. A few days later, the player was formally dismissed from the university's football program. Discussions in the locker room ranged from strong support for the player to mild disapproval of his actions. Teammates made comments such as "those are just his thoughts; I don't get why this is such a big deal", and "he was only joking. It's not that serious". Others remarked, "posting that stuff was probably not the best idea".

There was no public condemnation of the young man among the football players, choosing to remain silent more often than voicing an opinion. The majority of players defended his right to remain with the team despite his actions, counter to the football program's and athletic department's decision. From the first author's perspective as a participant observer, however, the incident seemed to support the idea that football culture promotes hegemonic masculinity and homophobia, at least among its players. At minimum, the culture appeared to excuse, if not condone, offensive and derogatory language directed at the LGBTQ community. But Jake also did not speak out against this player's actions, suggesting the difficulty in expressing any comments that depart from the hyper-masculine and compulsory heterosexual male culture of American college football.

One season later, at the beginning of fall football training camp in 2018, a variety of guest speakers were invited to talk to the team. Two of these speakers addressed topics seldom discussed openly within the hyper-male fraternity of football culture: sexual violence against women and homosexuality. The first speaker was activist Brenda Tracy, who had been raped by two Oregon State football players twenty years earlier, only to see them walk away and receive a one-game suspension. She relayed her traumatic story to the football team, as she had done at many colleges and universities around the country. She asked the young men in the room to take a pledge and to set the expectation that sexual abuse of women will not be tolerated in their lives and in the future. She called it #SetTheExpectation and the full roster of the football players at this university signed the pledge.

The second speaker, a former member of this university's football team and successful NFL player, opened up to the current team and acknowledged that he was gay. Ryan O'Callaghan, who would soon write an autobiography, *My Life on the Line: How the NFL Damn near killed me and Ended up Saving my Life* (2019), described the guilt, self-hatred and suicidal ideations as a closeted, highly successful

offensive lineman. He was drafted in 2006 by the New England Patriots and later played for the Kansas City Chiefs in his five-year career in the NFL. He talked about his crippling depression and his addiction to prescription narcotics as a professional player, building his own crypt in his home with plans of killing himself at the end of his career. He wrote, “being gay is death” (p. 16); he could not come to terms with being both a star football player and a gay man. But he had taken the leap to come out to reveal the man he really was: a very large gay man who had played high school, college and professional football. He told the current college team at his alma mater that our culture—and football culture in particular—was homophobic. Programs and teams were scared to reveal the truth about some of their players, preferring a don’t ask, don’t tell unspoken policy. He added that some of the biggest names in the NFL are gay athletes. O’Callaghan told the team that these athletes cannot be their true selves because of our cultural biases, stereotypes and rampant homophobia within male team sports such as football.

When he finished talking, Jake watched the reaction of his teammates to this man’s direct and honest pronouncements. The room was awkwardly quiet. Some of the players in the meeting room smacked their lips, looked away and seemed visibly uncomfortable. It appeared that there was some disdain towards this former NFL player and collegiate player, despite his obvious athletic accomplishments. The message conveyed to the team by a clearly homophobic minority was clear: *we don’t talk about this here. We are a football team and we are not gay, despite what this guy has to say.* That this gay guy had been far more successful at football than almost every member of the current team would ever be in the room may have been lost on the group. Perhaps more likely, no one wanted to speak up to this symbolic violence for fear of retribution and becoming the target of ridicule and contempt.

Despite the awkward silence, however, one of the players on the team asked the guest speaker several questions, delving more deeply into how O’Callaghan managed being gay in an NFL locker room, how his former college and professional teammates treated him now, and so on. After the guest speaker’s concluding remarks, a group of players made jokes and comments about their curious teammate, questioning the player’s sexuality. It was clear that this was a form of social control.

The two incidents outlined above intrigued Jake as a budding researcher, searching a topic of interest for his scholarship. He also had access to the team as a current (now former) player. He hoped that his membership on the team would provide him with honest access to study this topic more readily than someone on the outside. In order to address the potential limitations of his participant observation within American football culture, however, this study sought to empirically evaluate the level of homophobia among participants on this Division I college football team.

In particular, this research utilized the Attitudes Towards Lesbians and Gays (ATLG) scale, developed by Herek (1984), a survey instrument shown to be statistically reliable and with high internal consistency (Herek, 1984, 1994; Herek & McLemore, 2011). The scale has been used across numerous contexts, varying cultures and among a diverse group of participants (Cardenas & Barrientos, 2008; Detenber et al., 2007; Hegerty, 2002; Mohipp & Morry, 2004; Van de Meerendonk, Eisenger & Felling,

2003; Yu, Xiao & Xiang, 2011). To date, the ATLG scale has not been administered to an interscholastic, intercollegiate or professional football team. This study, then, seeks to fill a gap in the literature.

2. Purpose of the Study and Literature Review

The current study examines existing literature on the concept of male hegemony and its reproduction within American sporting cultures, particularly football. Hegemonic masculinity is defined as the pattern of practice that legitimizes men's dominant position in society and justifies the subordination of women and marginalized ways of being a man (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This literature review focuses on the evolving concept of hegemonic masculinity, hegemonic masculinity in sport, and football as the exemplar of hegemonic masculinity in sport. Specifically, this paper will address how male hegemony in team sports, such as football, promote homophobia as a form of symbolic violence and a powerful mechanism of social control. It then analyzes findings through a survey administered to one Division I college football team on the west coast of the United States, exploring participants' attitudes towards gay men. Finally, this study discusses future implications and possible recommendations to enhance a more open and inclusive climate within American youth and college football teams.

The guiding research question was whether male college football players self-report positive or negative attitudes towards gay men. The study was also interested in differences among members of the team based on demographic data, such as participants' age, year in school, and their familial backgrounds (e.g., where they grew up, parental levels of education and their race/ethnicity), and their self-reported sexual orientation and level of religious faith.

2.1 *American Football and Homophobia*

While the dominant narrative equates American football with hegemonic masculinity, sexism and homophobia, what empirical evidence exists to either confirm or refute these apparent relationships? The dearth of openly gay football players at the collegiate or professional levels suggests that the gridiron, the locker room and the homo-social culture of American football is not a very open or welcoming space for non-heterosexual/non-binary/LGBTQ athletes. Since former NFL football player David Kopay came out publicly in his 1977 autobiography, acknowledging that he "was caught in a lie between the masculine myth he so beautifully personified in public and the private reality of his life" (Kopay & Young, 1977, p. 3), few American football athletes have followed his lead.

Most recently, Ryan O'Callaghan is one of a relatively small collection of gay (albeit retired) football players to come out publicly. Despite O'Callaghan's claims that "every NFL team has at least one gay or bisexual player on the roster" (Ryan, 2019; Wakefield, 2019), this statement seems more conjecture (likely as it may be) than fact. Similarly, there are few openly gay college football players in the United States, where the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) boasts that 73,000 football players participate on 673 intercollegiate teams across four athletic divisions of competition (NCAA, 2020).

The media's fascination with University of Missouri All-American football player and 2013 Southeastern Conference (SEC) Defensive Player of the Year Michael Sam seemed to illustrate the apparent contradiction of participation in football, religion and homosexuality (Hall, 2016; Mазzie, 2014). That Sam was a 6-2", 260-pound, hard-hitting African American defensive end and the first openly gay football player drafted into the NFL, may have added to the public's fascination.

Football is not unique in its lack of diversity relative to self-reported sexual identity. Most male sports teams appear underrepresented with openly gay or bisexual athletes when compared to national averages of adolescent young men (Friedman et al., 2004; Gates, 2011, 2015; Savin-Williams, 2009). Many of these athletes are quick to deny suspicions of their homosexuality or bisexual tendencies. As such, closeted gay male athletes (or straight athletes assumed to be gay) engage in "heterosexual credentialing" by resorting to public assertions of their heterosexuality and/or overt displays of highly visible girlfriends (Lenskyj, 2013). Heterosexual credentialing is often connected to an athlete's economic marketability, whereby male athletic success is intricately tied to heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity. As Lenskyj argues (pp. 144-145), "a recent trend has seen the emergence of a "male apologetic", with "coming out straight" becoming part of many male athletes' repertoire. Ironically, while female athletes could satisfy some of their critics, some of the time, by having a beauty makeover—Babe Didrikson in the 1930s, Caster Semenya in 2009—there is no makeover route available for closeted gay male athletes (or straight athletes assumed to be gay), since they already look non-gay by virtue of their athletic masculinity".

2.2 Sport and the Social (Re)production of Hegemonic Masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity is continuously negotiated at the social and historical intersection of gender and sport (Bryson, 2002; Cahn, 2015; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Van Rhee, 2019). In this sense, there exist different constructions or categories of masculinity; boys and men develop varying attachment and/or rejection to these diverse categories (Gutmann, 2006; Warren, 1997; Willis, 2017). A changing social and historical context means that an idealized definition of masculinity is formulated and reformulated in a social and contested process (Pacholok, 2009; Whitehead, 1998). And yet, as Connell and Messerschmidt contend, "hegemony works in part through the production of exemplars of masculinity (e.g., professional sports stars), symbols that have authority despite the fact that most men and boys do not fully live up to them" (p. 846).

Dominant sports, in particular, glorify the masculine ideal in a narrowly defined form. This social production and reproduction of a hegemonic ideal or exemplar excludes both women and marginalized forms of masculinity. By essentializing and imposing strict gender divisions in work, family life and cultural practices, such as sports, an "emphasized femininity" (Connell, 1987) is likewise constructed as the binary opposite of hegemonic masculinity. These social constructs inform one another relationally. As public exemplars, for example, cheerleaders who articulate an emphasized femininity help make male football players the promoted image of hegemonic masculinity (Messner, 2011).

One of the most effective ways that this production is carried out is through the celebration of male

aggression and violence, where the body becomes a weapon, instrumentally used to inflict pain as part of athletic success and prowess (Bourdieu, 1978; Messner, 1990, 1992). But beyond the sport of football itself, violence and aggression may permeate the culture surrounding the game. In his description of the “triad of violence”, Messner (2002) argues that sports encourage men to be violent against women, other men, and against themselves. What holds this triad of violence together, according to the author, is group-based processes of misogyny, homophobia and the suppression of empathy. Messner notes, “what helps hegemonic masculinity sustain itself as the dominant form in a system of power relations is the *complicity* of other men, some (or many) of whom might be uncomfortable with some of the beliefs and practices that sustain hegemonic masculinity” (p. 30, author’s italics).

This study focuses on homophobia in American college football, an example of men’s symbolic violence against both men and women. Just as emphasized femininity serves a valuable role in maintaining male hegemony, so too does homophobia help maintain hegemonic masculinity. Homophobia perpetuated by young men is an ideological assault on other boys and men who do not adhere to the rigid and binary social constructs of gender and sexuality (masculinity/femininity, straight/gay dichotomies). It should be noted that homophobia as a tool utilized by men against other men often has little to do with whether the targeted parties identify as gay, bisexual, queer, etc. Homophobia has proven to be particularly pernicious within homo-social communities (Bhana & Mayeza, 2016; Fine, 1988; Pascoe, 2013), where homophobia becomes a tool used by boys and men to police other boys and men, attempting to ensure and/or modify behavior, dress, etc. As Messner (2002, p. 30) has argued, “homo-social sport offers an institutional context in which boys and men learn, largely from each other, to discipline their bodies, attitudes, and feelings within the logic of the triad of violence”.

2.3 American Football as the Exemplar of Hegemonic Masculinity

Sports are one of our most gender-traditional social arrangements that foster sexism and patriarchy (Kidd, Messner & Sabo, 1990; Messner & Disch, 2008). In *Sports Ideology, Attitudes Toward Women, and Anti-Homosexual Attitudes*, Harry (1995) surveyed 304 college students and examined the ways in which male hegemony in sport promotes negative attitudes toward homosexuality. He found that these attitudes were prevalent among young men but not young women. Citing Lehne (1976), Harry contends “gays are the heterosexual image of male failure...the image of gays serves a useful purpose in the world of gender politics by providing an object to be criticized and contrasted with the ideal of athletic manliness” (p. 110). The ideal exemplar of athletic manliness, fifty years ago and still today, remains the American football player.

In her book *The Stronger Women Get, the More Men Love Football*, Mariah Burton Nelson (1994) persuasively argued that the more independent women have become socially in the late twentieth century, the more men felt threatened, matched with a growing contempt for women. The more men felt threatened, the more they clung to football and other “manly sports”, such as hockey and boxing, as

potent cultural symbols of masculinity. On many football teams, where athletes are encouraged to express hegemonic masculinity, male contempt of women also extends to other men who do not live up to this aggressive and toxic form of masculinity.

2.4 Inclusive Masculinity

And yet, cultural trends in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century have contributed to less rigid and binary constructions of gender and sexuality, impacting how boys and men define and redefine their gender and sexual identities (Anderson & McCormack, 2018; Loftus, 2001; Lalor & RendleShort, 2007; McCormack, 2011). These changes have altered attitudes toward male homosexuality. In particular, there is a growing body of literature that evidences more progressive attitudes toward homosexuality in male sports and among heterosexual men (Adams, 2011; Adams & Anderson, 2012; Anderson & McGuire, 2012; Cashmere & Cleland, 2012; Cleland, 2016; Harris & Clayton, 2007; MacGrath. Anderson & Roberts, 2015; Price & Parker, 2003; Southall et al., 2009). In these studies, heterosexual male athletes have been found to display more accepting attitudes toward homosexuality, one of the central tenets of what Anderson (2005, 2009, 2018) calls inclusive masculinity.

In a culture characterized by inclusive rather than conservative masculinity, stratifications of men become less hierarchical and multiple masculinities emerge, affording a more diverse and dynamic configuration of gender identities. Femininity in men becomes less stigmatized and non-conforming masculinities experience less regulation (Anderson & McCormack, 2018). As hegemonic masculinity fails to maintain cultural dominance, emerging masculinities proliferate without social stigma. As Adams and Anderson (2012, p. 350) argue, “men described as ascribing to the tenets of inclusive masculinity demonstrate emotional and physical homo-social proximity and once taboo behaviors lose their homo-sexualizing significance”. Thus, in a culture characterized by inclusive masculinity, heterosexual men are permitted more homo-social tactility (touching) and emotional expressionism (the ability to open up emotionally).

Among many influential cultural factors that have led to the emergence of a more inclusive masculinity, social contact with sexual minorities helps to reduce prejudice and enhances more open attitudes toward homosexuality (McCann et al., 2009; Pettigrew, 2008). For example, when the homosexuality of a friend is revealed, such as during the process of an athlete coming out to his teammates, homophobic men are often forced to re-evaluate their impressions of someone they had previously viewed positively. Once they understand that a friend or teammate is gay, they often experience a kind of awakening, which directly confronts their preconceptions of homosexuality (Adams & Anderson, 2012; McCann et al., 2009).

As such, this study seeks to measure the level of homophobia in American football, specifically at the collegiate level. The study likewise affords the possibility that a more inclusive attitude towards marginalized masculinities exists among these college football players at this particular educational institution.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Participants in this study included 75 intercollegiate football players from a large, public Division I university. All participants were male, ranging in age from 18-24. A little more than half (52%) of the surveyed group were White; nearly one-third (29.33%) of the participants identified as Black. Eight percent of the respondents were mixed-race, 6.67% identified as Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, while 2.67% were Hispanic Latino, and 1.33% identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native. Seventy six percent (76%) of the surveyed population were California residents, while 24% were out-of-state, representing eleven different states, with Texas (3%) and Washington (3%) the most common. Seven percent identified as international. The distribution by year in school was relatively representative, with 17% freshmen, 13% sophomores, 23% juniors, 19% seniors and 28% recently graduated members of the team. The largest position groups on the college football team had the largest number of surveyed responses. By player position, linebackers (18.67%) were the largest group of participants while safeties (4%) had the smallest number of survey respondents. For the purpose of this study, these positions were recoded as either offensive or defensive. Special teams (kickers and punters) were coded as offensive players.

Self-reported levels of parental education were used as a proxy for social class. The data revealed that participants in this study reported that their parents were highly educated, with two-thirds of their fathers (68%) and mothers (67%) having earned a college and/or graduate degree. Only 17% of fathers and 19% of mothers had an education limited to some high school and/or had earned a high school diploma. The remaining 14-15% of both mothers and fathers, respectively, had been to college but had not earned their degrees. Table I illustrates the demographic data of study participants.

3.2 Procedures and Survey Instruments

A brief survey was administered that included several demographic questions. Self-reported demographic questions (e.g., sexual orientation, year in school, parental educational level, race/ethnicity) and the Santa Clara Religious Faith scale (SCSRF)—Short Form (Plante & Boccaccini, 1997a; Plante et al., 2002) served to provide several independent variables for this empirical study's research design. The SCSRF is a five-item self-report measure utilized to assess strength of religious faith regardless of religious denomination or affiliation. Sample questions include "I pray daily", and "my faith impacts many of my decisions". The scale uses a four-point Likert-type response format, ranging from (1) Strongly Disagree to (4) Strongly Agree. Higher aggregate scores indicate greater strength of faith. The internal consistency of this scale within our analyses was also high ($r=.94$).

A subscale of the Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men (ATLG) Scale was utilized to measure respondent's attitudes toward gay men. The original ATLG scale consisted of 20 statements, ten about lesbians (ATL) and ten about gay men (ATG). Shorter versions of the subscales with three, four, and five parallel items have been developed since the establishment of the original scale. These shorter versions have been found to be highly correlative with the original scales (e.g., $r_s > .95$ between the

five-item versions of the ATL and ATG and their ten-item counterparts) (Herek & McLemore, 2011). The ATLG subscales also have high levels of internal consistency ($\alpha > .85$ most college student samples). As a result of the scale's historical validity and reliability, this study utilized the five-item ATG subscale with a four-point Likert-type rubric, ranging from *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree*. Some items were reverse scored. The subscale includes the following statements: "male homosexuality is a perversion", "sex between two men is just plain wrong", "I think male homosexuals are disgusting", "male homosexuality is a natural expression of sexuality in men", and "male homosexuality is merely a different kind of lifestyle that should not be condemned". The sum of the item values was then divided by five (the number of statements) to enumerate a response scale metric. To further validate this scale in the context of collegiate football players, the scale was correlated with answers to the question "I would be comfortable with having an openly gay teammate", using a four-point Likert-type rubric, ranging from *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree*. Results showed a positive correlation of 0.67, suggesting that the ATG subscale used for this study measures the construct of attitudes toward homosexuality as intended. Furthermore, this correlation was statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. Given validity and reliability checks with the ATG subscale, the researchers were confident in its use as the study's dependent variable.

In addition to the quantitative analyses, an optional and open-ended question was included within the survey, asking participants to respond via an open-ended comment to the following statement: "I would be comfortable with having an openly gay teammate". Over half (56%) of survey participants responded to this optional question. Text from this open-ended question, while limited due to potential response bias, provided qualitative data to further validate the ATG subscale and triangulate quantitative findings.

3.3 Procedures

Participants were sent the following text message from Jake Ashton, the first author of this study and recently graduated member of the team at the time of survey administration: "Hey (Participant's Name), this survey is for a research project and should take no longer than 3 minutes. It's completely anonymous and I would have no clue what your answers are, so honesty is appreciated! Let me know if you have any questions". The survey link was included in the text message. Responses to the survey were electronically dispersed, collected and summary statistics were analyzed through a third-party platform.

Potential participants received this text message in the evening, while they were away from the rest of the team, whether at practice, in the weight room, or in the locker room. This measure was meant to ensure that no conversation regarding the research would ensue as study participants were invited to complete the survey. All participants received the same text message. Players who responded to the author, acknowledging their completion of the survey, were thanked for their participation. Some participants inquired about the objective of the study. In these instances, they received the same response: "To observe the attitudes and beliefs of a college football team towards homosexuals". The

average time needed to complete the survey was two minutes and 49 seconds.

4. Results

4.1 Are There Really no Gay College Football Players?

One of the most interesting initial findings of this pilot study was that all 75 participants (100%) self-identified as heterosexual or straight. This number is not reflective of the general student body at this particular university. In the most recent University of California Undergraduate Education Survey (UCUES, 2018) for this campus, 82% of undergraduate students self-identified as heterosexual. Other categories selected included gay/lesbian (4%), bisexual (7%), queer (3%), questioning (3%) and not listed above (2%). While this survey of Division I college football players only provided options of straight, gay and bisexual, there is still a significant difference when the football student athletes are compared with the general student body at this institution.

When conducting a z-test of proportions between the percentage of students that identify as gay or bisexual between this university's general student body ($n=9,916$) and the football players ($n=75$) sampled for this survey, we see that they are significantly different ($p < 0.01$), with the general student body reporting 11% as gay or bisexual and the football sample reporting 0% as gay or bisexual.

4.2 College Football Players and their Attitudes toward Homosexuality

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to further understand the relationship between football players' background characteristics and their attitudes toward homosexuality. As previously noted, the ATG subscale was used as the outcome variable in this analysis. The independent variables explored in this analysis included degree of religious faith, California residence, mother's education, and racial/ethnic identification. Furthermore, an interaction term was included between student identifying as Black and degree of religious faith.

The interaction term in this analysis was included in this model to understand if the relationship between religious faith and attitudes toward homosexuality was different depending on a football player's race/ethnicity. In other words, the interaction term further explored the idea that football players with stronger degrees of religious faith would have less favorable attitudes toward homosexuality, and this relationship would be further exacerbated if the football player were White or Black.

Results show that the degree of religious faith is the only statistically significant variable ($p, .001$). Specifically, results show that for Black football players, their mean ASG subscale score decreases by 0.35 for every one-point increase in degree of religious faith. For White football players, their mean ATG subscale score decreases by 0.33 for every one-point increase in degree of religious faith. However, this difference between White and Black football players is not statistically significant.

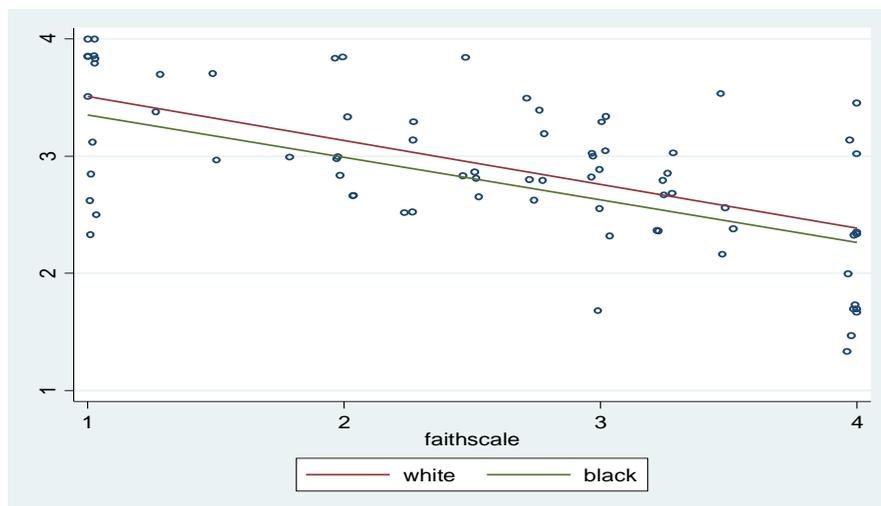


Figure 1. Visualization of the Interaction Term

Figure 1 visualizes this difference in attitudes toward homosexuality between White and Black football players, showing that the mean ASG subscale score is slightly lower for Black student athletes (though not statistically significant); however, the negative slope is not different between the two races. In fact, the slopes are nearly identical. Thus, in this analysis, degree of religious faith, independent of race, is the most significant variable for influencing a collegiate football player's attitudes toward homosexuality.

Table 1 shows the five statements included in the survey, alongside the percent of respondents that strongly agreed or agreed and the percent of respondents that strongly disagreed or disagreed. Overall, results show that the majority of collegiate football players had relatively positive attitudes toward homosexuality.

Table 1. Frequency of Agreement for Survey Statements (n=75)

Statement	Strongly Agree or Agree (%)	Strongly Disagree or Disagree (%)
<i>I would be comfortable with having an openly gay teammate.</i>	87	13
<i>Male homosexuality is merely a different kind of lifestyle that should not be condemned</i>	67	33
<i>Male homosexuality is a natural expression of sexuality in men.</i>	53	47
<i>Male homosexuality is a perversion.</i>	33	67
<i>Sex between two men is just plain wrong.</i>	28	72

4.3 Level of Comfort with Having an Openly Gay Teammate

Despite the fact that all football players surveyed identified as heterosexual or straight, several

participants speculated within their open-ended responses that it is likely that they have gay teammates who have just not come out yet. One participant wrote, for example, “I’m sure I have had or currently have gay teammates. The thought of that does not concern me”. Another responded, “I think there are several gay guys on the team. I’m comfortable being around them. Having them express their sexuality openly wouldn’t make much difference for me personally”. It may be worth noting that Americans’ estimate of the percentage of LGBTQ people in the United States is more than five times higher than respondents’ self-reported identification (McCarthy, 2019).

While roughly two-thirds of the team demonstrated an open or accepting attitude towards male homosexuality, nearly nine out of ten players in the open-ended data (87%) stated that they would be comfortable with a gay teammate. While a few respondents stated that an openly gay teammate “would ruin the locker room”, or that “I wouldn’t feel comfortable, especially in the sport that I’m playing”, the majority of the comments were more accepting. One participant simply wrote, “I ain’t trippin’”. Another responded, “he’s my teammate regardless of background. I respect those who respect me”. Still another wrote, “I wouldn’t treat him any different than how I treat my other teammates. Would not change anything for me”.

In general, many of the responses might be categorized as a live-and-let-live mentality. One participant wrote, “people can live their life freely as long as it doesn’t effect the lives of others around them”. Another wrote, “their sexuality does not limit or inhibit my life nor does it influence my sexuality”. One exception to this articulated sentiment, expressed by several participants, was if the player “acted gay”. One respondent wrote, for example, “if he doesn’t act gay and acts normal then we’re good”. Another participant noted, “As long as they don’t bother me with their gay stuff, I don’t care”. These comments beg the question of what being openly gay actually means for participants and the challenge of normalizing (and truly accepting) homosexuality in particular male sporting spaces.

Only one participant explicitly discussed their religious faith in relation to their response. The player wrote, “If I am being honest, homosexuality is a sin just like any other sin...The issue is that society has placed emphasis on certain sins as though they are greater than others. While I myself am not a homosexual and I will not teach my offspring to be or to engage in homosexuality, I won’t condemn someone for it. I would explain to my homosexual teammate why it’s wrong in Christianity, but I have my issues just like them. They are just different issues. I would be able to play football just like I would with a heterosexual teammate”. This interesting response might help explain how some participants in this study report negative attitudes towards homosexuality while still willing to play football with an openly gay teammate. This focus on freedom of expression has been a controversial topic at this American university and on college and university campuses nationwide for well over a century. Whether one shares this football student athlete’s sentiment or not, there is something refreshing about college students expressing a willingness to hear opposing points of view (and ways of being) while also feeling open to share a decidedly different perspective with civility.

5. Limitations and Future Directions

College football programs may serve as a site for institutional homophobia, a homo-social culture that promotes hegemonic masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality. Cultural norms remain conservative, particularly as these norms reify a rigid and binary gender order. A triad of violence—violence against women, against marginalized men and against one self—permeates the culture, leading boys and men to police and control other boys' and men's behavior. Existing literature and a common sense logic supports this homophobic narrative within football culture, but there has been little empirical evidence from the actual participants to support this assumption. It is likewise possible that youth, college and professional football programs might be (and/or might become) an open and inclusive environment for all participants, regardless of sexual orientation.

Findings suggest that this college football team may not demonstrate the level of homophobia expected of a male sports team often recognized as the exemplar of hegemonic masculinity. On the other hand, when one-third of your roster is homophobic and potentially vocal about their negative attitudes toward gay men, it is unlikely that bisexual or gay players would feel open to be their full selves. And yet, because this study is the first of its kind to survey American college football players about their attitudes toward male homosexuality, there is no reliable basis of comparison. This represents a limitation of the study, as we are unable to generalize about college football athletes nationwide. This limitation offers opportunities for future research, however, such as surveying other college football teams in the United States, playing in different regions of the country and at different competitive levels (Division I, II and III). Scholars might also survey other athletic teams at this or other institutions so as to provide comparison by sport and/or by gender. Finally, this data can provide a baseline for a longitudinal study of this university's football team over time (and/or other teams over time), measuring athletes' attitudes toward homosexuality in the years to come.

Another potential limitation of this study is that the university has a reputation for being both politically and socially liberal, located in the San Francisco Bay Area, one of the most affluent and LGBTQ friendly areas within the United States. The university is academically rigorous and often ranked as the number one public university in the nation (Anwar, 2018). As such, these college athletes' high school grade point averages and SAT/ACT scores are higher on average than most other football programs at this competitive level. Based on this cultural context and the data, then, this college football team is perhaps atypical of most college football teams in the country. On average, for example, the team appears to be over-represented with California residents with relatively well-educated parents. This unique context may suggest that members of this college football team may more readily embrace an inclusive form of masculinity.

Thus, one could argue that these findings might be less accepting and inclusive if surveyed at a less politically liberal college or university. At other institutions, for example, would the athletic department censor and/or dismiss a football student athlete for public homophobic comments? Would the football program at other schools embrace and invite a formerly closeted football college athlete, even one who

played in the NFL, to talk with current student athletes about being gay and the process of coming out? As such, this Division I football program might be unique relative to the American landscape of college football. Further, findings illustrated that homophobia was most strongly linked to degree of religious faith. This finding alone presents an opportunity to more fully examine the intersections of college football, religion, and homophobia, while also raising the question of the extent to which the degree of religious faith reported by this football team is comparable to other schools. And yet, these potential limitations afford scholars several possible directions for future research.

6. Implications and Concluding Remarks

As Adams and Anderson (2012) remind us, we must recognize that assessing homophobia (whether high or low levels) is always historically situated and contextually specific. As such, rather than continuing to talk abstractly about purported or assumed levels of homophobia in sport (and in certain sports, such as American football), we must cautiously investigate how homophobia varies across space (e.g., local, national, global), time and varying institutions, such as colleges or universities and within intercollegiate athletic programs.

Implications of this study suggest that athletic departments, and college football programs specifically, must intentionally confront homophobia in order to create a more inclusive climate or culture. Abiding by the university's non-discrimination statement and corresponding laws is the most basic adherence to institutional inclusivity. A more tailored equity, inclusion and diversity agenda for college athletes, coaches and administrators goes further in setting and educating a set of social expectations for genuine civility and a more open and welcoming department.

While "It Gets Better" viral videos are well meaning messages from out adults to LGBTQ youth, these supportive messages have limited impact on the structural and pernicious homophobia that still exists in our society. Male sports culture remains one of the last bastions of hegemonic masculinity and institutional homophobia. Rather than seeking the difficult dance of balancing an LGBTQ identity with an athletic identity, many high school and college athletes, particularly male athletes, either remain closeted while they compete/participate/play or quit their respective sport to be who they want to be. It should not have to be a choice.

But when young gay male athletes consistently hear homophobic slurs a part of the team's internal, locker room discourse, the constant cuts run deep. Sports talk that dismisses and discriminates against members of the team does not engender a culture of high performance, where athletes can be the best they can be. Coaches, administrators and college athletes should receive mandatory unconscious bias training, just as these staff and students are expected to be trained in the prevention of sexual harassment and assault.

More and more athletic departments have made intentional efforts to address discrimination and systematic racism, sexism and homophobia. Whether within their strategic plans, departmental statements of inclusion or the hiring of cabinet level staff focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion,

college and university athletic programs differentiate themselves as national leaders in their response to systemic oppression. By standing unequivocally against hate and providing realistic remedies to combat homophobia within athletic spaces, coaches, administrators and student athletes alike make safe a transformative opportunity for growth and development.

Decreasing homophobia is an uneven social process (Anderson, 2009). As Roper and Halloran (1970) noted some fifty years ago, college athletes who had previous contact with gay men and lesbians had significantly more positive attitudes toward these communities. For college football programs nationwide, real progress might mean providing the space for young men to not only feel comfortable with having a gay teammate, but to feel comfortable acknowledging their own gay, bisexual, queer or questioning identity while continuing to play football for their school. From our perspective, such a cultural development could be a dramatic win for the team, for a given athletic department and for college football in the United States more broadly.

Fiat Lux.

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