Varying Degrees of Support: Understanding Parents’ Positive Attitudes Toward LGBT Coaches

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The purpose of this study was to examine parents’ supportive attitudes toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) coaches, as well as the sources of that support. The authors drew from the model of dual attitudes and a multilevel framework developed for the study to guide the analyses. Interviews were conducted with 10 parents who lived in the southwest United States. Analysis of the data revealed three different types of support: indifference, qualified support, and unequivocal support. Further analyses provided evidence of multilevel factors affecting the support, including those at the macro-level (religion), the meso-level (parental influences and contact with sexual minorities), and the micro-level (affective and cognitive influences) of analysis. Theoretical implications and contributions of the study are discussed.

Keywords: sexual orientation, LGBT, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, coaching

Although prejudice against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) players, coaches, and sport administrators has traditionally been the norm (see Griffin, 1998, 2012), there is some evidence of change. National polls in the United States, the popular press, and academic literature all point to such change. For instance, polling data from a variety of sources (i.e., General Social Survey, Gallup, American National Election Studies) show attitudes toward sexual minorities and their civil rights improving over time (for an overview, see Herek, 2009). The LGBT-focused website Outsports.com has offered perhaps the most consistent coverage of this topic within the realm of sport and physical activity. There is even a section on the website entitled “Straight Allies,” documenting stories of athletes from around the world who support (or indicate they would support) sexual-minority teammates. Finally, within the academic domain, various scholars have documented pro-LGBT attitudes among athletes, with their work demonstrating that (a) gay men experience welcoming and inclusive team-sport environments (Anderson, 2009, 2011a, 2011b); (b) lesbian and bisexual college athletes report positive “coming out” experiences and supportive teammates (Fink, Burton, Farrell, & Parker, 2012); (c) sport serves as a space in which women can contest traditional ideas about sexuality and resist sexual prejudice (Ravel & Rail, 2008); and (d) although heterosexism still persists, its pervasiveness in sport is on the decline (Griffin, as cited in Sartore-Baldwin, 2012).

A review of this literature suggests widespread changes in the attitudes people have toward LGBT individuals in general and within sport in particular. There is reason, however, to question such a conclusion. Consider that researchers have long shown most people are reluctant to openly express prejudice (Campbell, 1947), and this is also the case when it comes to sexual prejudice (McCormack & Anderson, 2010). Instead, people are likely to discriminate in subtle, nuanced ways (Son Hing, Chung-Yan, Hamilton & Zanna, 2008). Critical examination of how professional athletes voice support for LGBT teammates offers further support for this position. In 2013, U.S. National Football League players DeMario Davis, Kirk Cousins, and Adrian Peterson all indicated they would welcome an openly gay player on their teams. However, each also qualified his response: Davis equated homosexuality with drunkenness, and Cousins equated it with prostitution; Peterson was concerned that having a gay teammate would make interactions in the locker room (e.g., showering) uncomfortable (“Adrian Peterson OK,” 2013; Buzinski, 2013). Thus, although each of the players initially voiced pro-LGBT sentiments, they also made derogatory statements, casting sexual minorities as sinful and promiscuous.

Although these represent but three examples, they do raise the question of what offering support for LGBT
Theoretical Framework

Positive Attitudes Toward LGBT Coaches

Researchers have commonly considered attitudes toward sexual minorities—whether negative or positive—as one-dimensional in nature. This is seen, for example, in questionnaires designed to measure people’s attitudes toward sexual minorities (Herek, 1984; Morrison & Morrison, 2003) as well as in empirical analyses set within the sport context. With respect to the sport context, researchers have examined British athletes’ attitudes toward sexual minorities over time (Bush, Anderson, & Carr, 2012), sport and exercise students’ attitudes toward sexual minorities (Gill, Morrow, Collins, Lucey, & Schultz, 2006), and parents’ sexual prejudice toward LGBT coaches (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009)—all of which adopted a one-dimensional view of prejudice. A survey of the qualitative studies in this area reveals a similar trend. Specifically, researchers have examined both positive attitudes toward sexual minorities, including investigations of men participating in team sports (Anderson, 2009, 2011a, 2011b) and women softball players (Fink et al., 2012). Other scholars have used qualitative methods to explore sexual prejudice directed at coaches (Krane & Barber, 2005), kinesiology professors (Sartore & Cunningham, 2010), and college athletes (Melton & Cunningham, 2012). In all cases, the attitudes were treated as one-dimensional in nature.

As Wilson, Lindsey, and Schooler (2000) note in their model of dual attitudes, however, such an approach is problematic; instead, they suggest “there are times . . . when people have more than one evaluation of the same attitude object, one of which is more accessible than the other” (p. 101). These attitudes—one implicit and the other explicit—operate together, and depending on various contextual factors (e.g., the time to provide the response and motivation to monitor negative attitudes), the implicit or explicit attitudes will be salient. As one illustrative example, people might be aware of an implicit attitude (e.g., an antigay attitude), consider it undesirable, and then take steps to override it with a different (explicit) attitude. In this case, two attitudes are present, but the individual is sufficiently motivated to activate a more desirable one.

There is empirical support for Wilson et al.’s (2000) model. Although most of the work in this area has focused on race (e.g., Son Hing et al., 2008), the dynamics also operate when considering sexual prejudice. For example, Hebl, Foster, Mannix, and Dovidio (2002) examined employers’ sexual prejudice directed toward job applicants. They did not observe explicit forms of prejudice, because sexual minority and heterosexual job applicants were equally likely to have permission to complete a job application and receive a call back for the job. However, there were subtle forms of bias: relative to their interactions with heterosexuals, employers spoke fewer words to, spent less time with, and interacted more negatively with applicants presumed to be lesbian or gay. Cunningham, Sartore, and McCullough (2010) observed a similar pattern in their study of persons applying for positions at fitness clubs. Participants rated applicants presumed to be LGBT as equally qualified to those presumed to be heterosexual, but they did discriminate in more subtle ways, ascribing less positive nonwork attributions to applications from people presumed to be sexual minorities. These attribution ratings held a significant association with hiring recommendations. These two studies suggest that although explicit forms of sexual prejudice might not manifest, more subtle, implicit forms will.

We draw from and extend the model of dual attitudes (Wilson et al., 2000) and the empirical work (Cunningham et al., 2010; Hebl et al., 2002) to inform our current work. Recall that we are interested in understanding the nature of people’s positive attitudes toward LGBT coaches—that is, persons whose explicit attitudes are pro-LGBT in nature. Among this group, some might publically express positive attitudes but then express subtle or nuanced forms of bias, which is the nature of implicit bias (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). This is similar to our previous discussion of DeMario Davis, Kirk
This is the crux of the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998), which suggests that the more interactions people have with dissimilar others, the more positive their attitudes are likely to be toward those persons. These two examples illustrate that meso-level factors (i.e., those operating at the group and interpersonal level) potentially affect parents’ attitudes toward LGBT coaches.

Finally, micro-level factors are those elements specific to the individual. For instance, Cortina (2008) suggested that both affective and cognitive factors were associated with people engaging in subtle discriminatory ways. Similar factors might affect people’s support for sexual minorities. For instance, affective factors might include one’s value system or spiritual beliefs—two factors shown to influence prejudice (Herek, 2009). Likewise, the categorization process represents a cognitive factor (Cortina, 2008). This is consistent with the social categorization framework (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), suggesting that people’s attitudes toward others are a function of how they categorize them. If sexual minorities are seen as “others” or outsiders, which is frequently the case (Griffin, 1998), then attitudes are likely to be negative; however, if sexual minorities are seen as similar to the self, then subsequent attitudes are likely to be positive. Collectively, this review suggests that a variety of personal (i.e., micro-level) factors have the potential to influence parents’ support for LGBT coaches.

In drawing from our multilevel conceptual framework, we developed the following research question:

**RQ1—**What is the nature of parents’ support for LGBT coaches?

### Factors Affecting Support for LGBT Coaches

The second purpose of the study was to understand factors associated with positive attitudes toward sexual minorities. Savin-Williams et al. (2010) have noted that research in this area is scarce, and the same can be said for theory development. We can, however, draw from the related work focusing on prejudice, stigma, and discrimination (Cortina, 2008; Cunningham, 2012; Herek, 2009) to develop an understanding of how people develop and express positive attitudes toward those minorities. Specifically, a common theme among these frameworks is a multilevel focus, given that these theorists have pointed to societal-, group-, and individual-level factors that affect people’s attitudes toward others. We adopt a similar perspective in our research.

Macro-level factors are those operating at the societal level and include issues such as prevailing norms (Herek, 2009), traditions (Cortina, 2008), and values (Herek, 2009). In this way, what people experience and observe in society is likely to influence them on a personal level. As we previously outlined, polling data suggest attitudes toward sexual minorities have improved over time (for a review of the data, see Herek, 2009). Correspondingly, Anderson (Anderson, 2009, 2011b; McCormack & Anderson, 2010) has demonstrated a similar pattern in his research of male team sport athletes. Likewise, Staurosky (2012) has argued that cultural artifacts, such as the media coverage of women and LGBT athletes, can powerfully shape people’s attitudes toward these athletes. It is possible that similar patterns are operating in our study, such that parents’ support of LGBT coaches is a function of macro-level factors.

Meso-level factors are those influences operating at the group or interpersonal level of analysis. In most cases, authors point to organizational characteristics as examples of how meso-level factors manifest (Cortina, 2008; Cunningham, 2012), but there are other possibilities. For instance, social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) suggests that people are likely to adopt the perspective and behaviors collectively endorsed by the group with which they are affiliated (for a diversity example, see Cunningham & Sartore, 2010). The relationship people have with others might also influence their attitudes toward sexual minorities. This is the crux of the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998), which suggests that the more interactions people have with dissimilar others, the more positive their attitudes are likely to be toward those persons. These two examples illustrate that meso-level factors (i.e., those operating at the group and interpersonal level) potentially affect parents’ attitudes toward LGBT coaches.

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In drawing from our multilevel conceptual framework, we developed the following research question:

**RQ2—**What macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors influence parents’ support for LGBT coaches?

### Method

#### Participants

Interviews were conducted with 10 parents living in the Southwest United States. The sample included 4 African American women, 2 Hispanic women, 2 White women, and 3 Hispanic men. The mean age was 43.50 years ($SD = 11.79$). Table 1 provides more detailed demographic information.

As a way of providing some contextual information, all participants were from a single state, but they lived in various locales throughout, including both rural and urban settings. The state is very conservative, as evidenced by voting patterns, the constitutional amendment declaring marriage to be between a man and woman, and the lack of employment protection for sexual minorities.

#### Procedures

This work represents part of a larger study aimed at understanding people’s attitudes toward LGBT individuals and factors that shape those attitudes (see Cunningham & Melton, 2012, 2013). The previous studies were both quantitative in nature, included large sample frames, and examined factors associated with people’s
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attitudes toward sexual minorities. As part of those studies, participants were asked if they would be interested in participating in a follow-up interview to more fully discuss their responses. Thus, because the purpose of this study was to examine the nature of support for LGBT individuals, we engaged in purposeful sampling and selected parents from the larger sample frame who had (a) expressed support for LGBT coaches on a questionnaire they previously received and (b) also expressed interest in participating in a follow-up study related to the topic. All persons were contacted via e-mail, alerting them to the purpose of the study and asking if they would be willing to participate in a subsequent interview. After they agreed to participate, we decided on a time to conduct the interview over the phone.

The first author conducted all of the interviews, which were semistructured in nature. The interview began with an introduction of the study and a brief overview of who the interviewer was and why he was conducting this research. This served to build rapport with the interview participants. In addition to gathering background information, we asked the participants (a) if they would be willing to let their children play on a team led by a LGBT coach, and (b) the basis for this decision; (c) their general attitudes toward LGBT individuals, and (d) what shapes those attitudes; and (e) why they thought sexual minorities still faced discrimination in society. The last question was included as a way of further delving into attitudes toward LGBT individuals and the basis for those attitudes.

All interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed verbatim. During the entire process, the first author also kept a reflexive journal, where he recorded personal observations and perspectives concerning the process (Glesne, 2006). Such journals have many benefits and allow the researcher to understand how personal decisions, attitudes, and biases impact the research process (Potter, 1996; Schwandt, 2007).

### Table 1 Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alias</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2 sons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2 daughters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kay</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3 sons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooke</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 daughter, 1 son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2 sons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonja</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christine</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2 sons, 1 daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maricela</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1 son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriel</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3 daughters</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes.** Sexual orientation ranges from 0 (completely heterosexual) to 6 (completely homosexual).

### Epistemological Position and Data Analysis

During the research process, we adopted a constructivist-interpretivist perspective, such that we sought to understand the lived experiences and perspectives of the participants (Ponterotto, 2005). This perspective is “participant dominant” (Krane & Baird, 2005, p. 90) and puts a primacy on the voices and understandings of the participants. Along these lines, although researchers should acknowledge their own values and lived experiences, a constructivist-interpretivist perspective calls for them to also bracket these viewpoints, such that they “suspend commonsense assumptions about social reality in order to understand how it is that actors experience their world as real, concrete, factual, and objective—in short, to understand how the taken-for-granted features of social life are accomplished” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 24). Thus, we sought to fully understand how the participants negotiated their social environment to develop their attitudes toward LGBT coaches. Others have also adopted this approach in their analysis of diversity issues in sport (Cunningham, 2009).

In analyzing the data, the first author read and reread the transcripts to familiarize himself with the data. The transcripts were then loaded into NVivo 9 (QSR International, Doncaster, Australia), a program used as an analytical tool and a means to store the data. Both authors used the previously articulated framework to analyze the data and break them down into codes. This approach is consistent with what Schwandt (2007) describes as an “a priori, content-specific” coding scheme, whereby codes are “developed from careful study of the problem or topic under investigation and the theoretical interests that drive the inquiry” (p. 32). As Fine, Weis, Wesson, and Wong (2000) note, connecting the participants’ personal narratives to theory provides a richer understanding of the phenomena at hand. Consistent with the
constructivist-interpretivist perspective and Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) recommendations, we took several steps to improve both credibility and trustworthiness, including the use of peer debriefers and member checks (see Glesne, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 2007). Each participant was asked to review her or his transcripts for accuracy and to give them a chance to clarify any statements. Although some clarifications were made, the participants did not offer any substantial changes. In addition, three independent researchers, none of whom were involved with the project, reviewed the different codes and interpretations. This served as an audit of our work and also highlighted areas where clarifications and revisions were required.

Results and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine parents’ attitudes toward LGBT coaches. In drawing from the model of dual attitudes (Wilson et al., 2000), we examined whether parents who had expressed pro-LGBT attitudes would vary in the nature of that support (RQ1). We were also interested in examining what might influence this support; thus, in drawing from a multilevel model perspective, we explored whether participants attributed their support to factors at the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels (RQ2). In the following space, we address the two primary research questions, examining the nature of the parents’ support for LGBT coaches as well as the multilevel factors influencing said support. We offer an illustrative overview of these findings in Figure 1.

Nature of Support for LGBT Coaches

The first research question focused on the nature of parents’ support for LGBT coaches. Results are supportive of our theoretical framework and the model of dual attitudes (Wilson et al., 2000), because although all of the parents had previously expressed some level of support for their children playing for an LGBT coach, the nature of this support varied considerably. Results of the data analysis yielded three forms of support: indifference, qualified support, and unequivocal support. Only one person, Gabriel, voiced a sort of indifference. When asked why he supported LGBT coaches and sexual minorities in general, he responded:

You know, I think honestly, like a lot of Americans, being your typical heterosexual suburbanite with a wife and three kids, you know issues of gay rights are really not at the forefront of my mind or my wife’s mind.

In this way, Gabriel’s support was not necessarily a function of having a positive mindset toward sexual minorities, but more because he did not think about the issue and thus, by extension, does not have negative attitudes either. He went on to suggest that people think about “things in American society that are much more pressing” than they do about their attitudes toward LGBT persons.

Figure 1  Illustrative summary of findings.
Other persons expressed support for LGBT coaches, but qualified this support. That is, in describing their attitudes toward LGBT coaches, they express support but do so on a conditional basis. Consider the following examples:

I don’t have a problem with it whatsoever again as long as you are doing what you are supposed to be doing, your job or whatever it may be I have no issues what so ever. (Brooke, emphasis added)

My attitude is that people can live the way they want to as long as they don’t promote it. (Isaac, emphasis added)

Sure, I actually don’t have a problem with any gender issues. The only issue I would have is if the person that was coaching was a sexual predator. (Kay, emphasis added)

In each of these examples, participants express support for LGBT coaches, but they did so in ways that (a) were qualified and (b) served to perpetuate underlying stereotypes about sexual minorities, including those that sexual minorities have ulterior motives (Brooke), promote their sexual orientation to others (Isaac), and are sexual predators (Kay). Herek (2009) notes that such stereotypes persist even though most heterosexual American adults acknowledge that the claims are baseless (see also Herek, 2002). It is also interesting that such conditional statements are seldom included when discussing heterosexual coaches or coaches in general (in which case, they are likely presumed to be male and heterosexual).

Consistent with the model of dual attitudes (Wilson et al., 2000), we argue that these sentiments serve dual purposes. By expressing support for LGBT coaches (i.e., explicit attitudes), the parents absolve themselves of expressing prejudicial attitudes. That is, they communicate support (even if they do so partially) for sexual minorities and therefore cast themselves as egalitarian, accepting individuals. But, by offering qualified support, the parents in this study discriminate in subtle ways that can otherwise be explained away (i.e., implicit attitudes). The conditional statements are both largely institutionalized as a form of heterosexism, and thus part of the societal norm, and can also be framed as protective statements (e.g., supporting the coach so long as the welfare of the child is maintained). Nevertheless, harmful and inaccurate stereotypes about sexual minorities are propagated, further casting LGBT individuals as “others.” These dynamics are consistent with contemporary forms of prejudice, as many people will not discriminate in situations where doing so would reflect negatively upon them but instead express bias in subtle, nuanced ways (Crandall, Eshleman, & O’Brien, 2002; see also Cunningham et al., 2010).

Although some participants expressed indifference and others qualified support, a third group of participants voiced unequivocal support for LGBT coaches. Three persons, Christine, Sonja, and Maricela, offered such support. Maricela, for instance, noted:

I would have no problem with [my son] playing sports that had a coach of any sexual orientation no matter what it may be, male or female. My reasoning is that my child is currently being raised by 2 mothers, and I myself am bisexual, and he is adjusting quite nicely. His first words were ‘mom’ and ‘mama’ and he knows how to differentiate the two so I think that it shouldn’t make a difference and I don’t think it would make a difference.

Christine, who also expressed unequivocal support, explained that being LGBT “doesn’t make them a bad person. That is no weight on their character or anything.” She also discussed the sense of hurt and surprise when one of her junior-high teachers had been terminated largely on the basis of the teacher’s sexual orientation. This story, which she vividly relayed, helped to shape the positive attitudes she now held. Finally, Sonja noted how, although she previously expressed conditional support, she was now fully supportive of sexual minorities.

Unlike persons in the other groups, parents in this group offered support for sexual minorities and did so without equivocation. This work contributes to Son Hing et al.’s (2008) work, which focused on racial prejudice, by showing that some people have truly positive attitudes toward those who differ from them. From a model of dual attitudes perspective, parents in this group have alignment between their explicit and implicit attitudes toward sexual minorities.

Factors Influencing Parents’ Support for LGBT Coaches

The second research question was concerned with the factors that influenced parents’ support for LGBT coaches. In analyzing the data, we drew from our multilevel framework, which pointed to various influences of parents’ attitudes toward LGBT coaches. We present the themes that emerged at each level of analysis (see Figure 1).

Macro-level influences. Macro-level factors include elements at the societal level, such as cultural norms, traditions, institutionalized understanding, and values (Cunningham, 2012; Cortina, 2008; Herek, 2009) that can affect people’s attitudes toward various phenomena. Religious institutions represent one of the more robust macro-level factors, because religious beliefs can also serve as the basis for people’s prejudice toward LGBT individuals (Finlay & Walther, 2003; Schulte & Battle, 2004; Whitley, 2009). We observed this in our study of college athletes (Melton and Cunningham, 2012). Participants in that study relayed how their strength coach “hates it if you’re gay,” and “says things like ‘God will get me’ and ‘I need to turn from my sinful ways’” (p. 53). Such sentiments can translate into feelings of guilt and shame (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 2009), something else we also observed. One of the athletes in our prior study felt her lesbianism was sinful, whereas others reported feeling terrible and hating themselves (Melton and Cunningham, 2012). These findings, and others like them,
who identifies as bisexual, held that her creator: toward LGBT individuals. As one example, Maricela, prevailing thoughts of how religion affects attitudes nature of these perspectives and that they differed from minority coaches on their religious and spiritual beliefs. The first author noted in the reflexive journal the unique nature of these perspectives and that they differed from prevailing thoughts of how religion affects attitudes toward LGBT individuals. As one example, Maricela, who identifies as bisexual, held that her creator:

. . . would not create me incorrectly. So I was made the way I was supposed to be, whether it be with a man or a woman, so be it . . . I am currently happy, I am happy in my faith, and as far as heaven or hell, I don’t think I will be punished for loving someone.

Maricela’s sentiments bring to light several important points. First, she held that her bisexuality was part of how she was created and was not a mistake or something that was wrong. Second, she rejected the notion that expressing love toward another person, in this case a same-sex individual, was somehow inappropriate or something for which she would face negative consequences.

Other participants also focused on love, but in this case, a love that took the form of high regard and warmth toward others. The participants also noted how their focus on love was in contrast to how they interpreted the actions of others who held strong religious beliefs. Kay commented:

We are supposed to love all of our brothers and sisters, and that’s what God’s work does. We are supposed to love everyone and be kind to everyone. You know [the Bible] doesn’t say anything in there about going around and beating up people and things like that or what happened to Matthew Sheppard,6 it doesn’t say anything about you know the evil things people do as far as being in that mindset. It does say committing those crimes are sins. So yeah we are supposed to love everyone.

Sonja expressed similar sentiments:

You know, I don’t care that people say they are Biblical scholars who do all of this stuff because sometimes I feel like people are heartless sometimes. I just look at Jesus as an example. For the most part, he was constantly being told why are you treating these people with love because they are supposed to be lepers and these horrible people. Why, because I am love, that is what I do. And I know that there are people that are still like that, you know . . . It is like if you try to live that life and you are heartless then I think you are missing the point.

Sonja felt that God commanded her “to love him and to love others, and he didn’t say to judge [sexual minorities] according to your interpretation of the Bible.”

Thus, although religion and religious fundamentalism have been (and continue to be) used as a source of sexual prejudice, these examples illustrate that religiosity and support for sexual minorities can and do coexist.

Meso-level factors. Meso-level factors are those influences operating at the group or interpersonal level of analysis. We observed two such factors in our analyses: parental influences and contact with sexual minorities.

Several parents in the study suggested that their positive attitudes toward LGBT coaches were a function of how they were raised. Christine, for instance, pointed to the values passed down by her mother: “my mom was never really one to judge people, so she used to always tell me, you know, don’t judge anybody.” Brooke also mentioned the influence of her family: “I was raised to accept everybody as who they are . . . you don’t condemn anybody just because of a different idea, or race, or a different orientation.” She went on to add that her “parents really raised us to be accepting and open minded.” These comments are consistent with the literature showing that parents and family shape children’s views toward diversity and inclusion (Powell & Graves, 2003). Indeed, some of the parents noted that this teaching carried over into how they raised their children. As an example, Christine told of her 7-year-old learning information in school contrary to her supportive values:

It amazes me what he knows and what he is starting to find out from the children at school. So I had to start to set him straight last year when he got into the public school system because I don’t want him to start getting bad information early because it is going to be too hard to change his perception later.

Another meso-level factor affecting the parents’ attitudes toward LGBT coaches was the previous contact they had with sexual minorities. The benefits of contact are consistent with the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998) and recent meta-analytic data (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Smith, Axelson, & Saucier, 2009), all of which suggest a positive relationship between interactions with sexual minorities and positive attitudes toward that group. Kay, for example, had several opportunities for contact, first during her youth, where she spent time with her grandmother and her grandmother’s friends, some of whom were gay men, and then again during her graduate studies. With respect to the latter experiences, she commented:

I was very blessed to live in married student housing at [university], and there was a community of lesbian women that were raising children, and I got to know them and was part of their group, and you
know that was really cool. Some of the girls I work with in my lab at (University) were also lesbians and I got to know them.

In a similar way, Brooke spent time with friends, coaches, and teammates who were LGBT, and attributed these experiences to the positive attitudes she now held. For Sonja, a transformation in her attitudes (from qualifi ed to unequivocal) took place when her brother disclosed his gay sexual identity and when she and her husband started to develop friendships with LGBT individuals. As a result of these interactions and friendships, her attitudes toward sexual minorities became more positive, and she also became more attuned to LGBT rights, including adoption, workplace protections, and marriage.

Collectively, these data show how parents constructed their views toward sexual minorities, at least in part, on the basis of their interpersonal relationships with others. Parents’ teaching provided cues for normative behavior (see also Herek, 2000), whereas contact allowed for positive affective ties to be generated and maintained (see also Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). In both cases, participants’ positive attitudes toward sexual minorities were a function of their interactions with others and lived experiences. This is consistent with Richard’s perspective toward prejudice: “I don’t believe that a person has it inherently in them to discriminate. It is just passed on from generation to generation.” In the same way, positive attitudes toward sexual minorities are passed on through the meso-level influences of parental teaching and interactions with sexual minorities.

**Micro-level factors.** Finally, micro-level factors are those elements internal to the individual, and can include both affective and cognitive components (Cortina, 2008). We observed both of these in the current study. From an affective perspective, participants saw holding negative attitudes toward LGBT coaches as a form of discrimination and thus antithetical to their egalitarian values. For instance, in commenting on why she does not hold negative attitudes toward LGBT coaches, Sonja commented, that it is “wrong to discriminate in that way.” In a similar way, Sharon noted that she has an “open understanding . . . it doesn’t matter if it’s race, creed, or sexual orientation.”

Other parents likened sexual prejudice to other forms of discrimination and thus saw their support as a larger push for equality. For instance, Maria commented on the mistreatment of and curtailment of the rights of sexual minorities, and paralleled this subjugation with that experienced by racial minorities: “I remember when they were separating Whites from Blacks—do not drink water from here, they are doing the same thing to them, to the gay and lesbians.” Gabriel’s perspective was also consistent with this line of thinking:

Like many numerical minorities, gays and lesbians have historically been marginalized and excluded and at extremes exploited in American society. So I think the parallels are there between the gay and lesbian community and other subgroups in the United States who are not able to receive the same benefits and legal rights and all kinds of rights as the “dominant” group.

Other participants expressed cognitive influences, with a particular emphasis on the social categorization of sexual minorities. Recall that people’s antigay attitudes are a function of them perceiving sexual minorities as different, “others,” and outside the norm (Griffin, 1998; Herek, 2009). When these categorizations are salient and important to the individual, they can result in bias, because people view in-group members more favorably and behave more positively toward them than they do toward out-group members (see also Riordan, 2000). Several of the participants in this study recognized those dynamics. Brooke noted that, “whenever you don’t understand something or you don’t want to listen to something, your misunderstanding and your misinterpretation of it causes fear and then that in turn spurs on negativity and hatefulness.” The latter comment is consistent with the notion that intergroup anxiety is a proximal antecedent of prejudice (Binder et al., 2009; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

But just as seeing someone as an out-group member can result in prejudice, researchers have also shown that bias is reduced when these categorization boundaries are broken down, a process known as decategorization (Brewer & Miller, 1984). Two processes contribute to this: differentiation, where people recognize that not all out-group members are the same, and personalization, where people realize that out-group members and in-group members share many of the same characteristics. Brown and Hewstone (2005) explain that because of these two processes, “the original categorization boundaries should lose their usefulness for organizing people’s perceptions, emotions, and behavior” (p. 262).

Several of the participants provided responses reflective of the personalization process, noting that sexual minorities were just like heterosexuals—something that resulted in pro-LGBT attitudes. Kay, for instance, said that sexual minorities “are people just like the rest of us,” and also added “they have the same wants and desires as the rest of us, and you know, they are people like we are. I mean, they are human beings with wants and needs just trying to live their life too.” Gabriel also noted the similarities of heterosexuals and LGBT individuals: “I think the reality is that, more and more, the gay and lesbian couple living on your street is a lot like you. You know they are raising their kids, they are working, they get up in the morning,” and so on. The participants seemed to note these similarities and thus reject the notion that LGBT individuals or coaches were different from their heterosexual counterparts. Sharon argued that “they don’t act any different just because their sexual orientation.” Likewise, Maricela reflected on her experiences with a lesbian volleyball coach, noting, “I feel like her teaching styles were no different than anybody who was straight or any other orientation.” Finally, Brooke wondered, “I don’t understand why people think they are so different from us.”
Collectively, these comments suggest that both affective and cognitive micro-level factors served to influence parents’ positive attitudes toward LGBT coaches. On the one hand, expressing prejudice was something antithetical to their personal values (i.e., an affective factor), but on the other hand, the comments affirm the effects of breaking down categorization boundaries on parents’ attitudes toward LGBT coaches (i.e., a cognitive factor).

Conclusions
The purpose of this study was to examine the nature of parents’ support for sexual minorities and factors that shaped those attitudes. Although previous researchers recognized the role of dual attitudes in the expression of prejudice (Wilson et al., 2000), and sexual prejudice in particular (Cunningham et al., 2010; Hebl et al., 2002), we extended this theoretical perspective to consider the dual role of positive attitudes toward sexual minorities. All participants had previously expressed support for sexual minorities and would allow their children to play on teams led by LGBT coaches, but results indicate that the nature of support varied considerably and took three forms: indifference, qualified support, and unequivocal support. Although parents who express unequivocal support clearly have positive attitudes toward LGBT coaches and behavioral manifestations are likely to follow suit, questions arise concerning qualified support. If this form of support is similar to implicit prejudice (as previously suggested), then similar dynamics are likely to take place: parents will openly express positive attitudes toward sexual minorities as a way of avoiding the negative social consequences of appearing discriminatorily, but when discriminatory behavior can be deflected to sources other than the self (e.g., child protection; religious institutions), parents will be more likely to discriminate (see also Son Hing et al., 2008). We submit that although the parents referred to their beliefs as a form of support, it more closely resembles a subtle and contemporary form of prejudice against LGBT coaches.

Another element of the study was to identify factors contributing to parents’ support of LGBT coaches. Consistent with our conceptual framework, we identified various multilevel influences of LGBT support. Our findings are consistent with what Klein, Dansereau, and Hall (1994) refer to as a mixed determinants model, whereby factors at multiple levels of analysis affect an outcome (i.e., support for LGBT coaches) at a single level. That noted, although we presented the influences separately, it is likely they are related. We suspect, for instance, that both meso-level factors (parental influences and contact with sexual minorities) likely influence the two micro-level factors that emerged in the study. A similar argument could likely be made for the influence of religion on both the meso- and micro-level factors. In short, the findings demonstrate that a constellation of factors influence parents’ attitudes toward LGBT coaches.

Furthermore, the type of support parents expressed was not related to the impetus for that support, but there was one exception: the macro-level factor of religious foundations. Parents whose religious beliefs were such that homosexuality was considered wrong or immoral also expressed either indifference or qualified support. However, parents who supported sexual minorities because of their religious beliefs largely expressed unequivocal support, with Kay (who expressed qualified support) being the lone exception. Thus, although the relationship is not a perfect one, this pattern does suggest that participants in this study who expressed a religion-based desire to (a) love others, (b) hold LGBT individuals in high regard and esteem, and (c) share kindness with others also expressed a strong, genuine support for LGBT coaches. For some, sexual minorities engage in immoral behaviors but should be supported as long as their behaviors match prescriptive norms (i.e., qualified support). For others, though, all persons—LGBT or heterosexual—are worthy of love, respect, and admiration, and therefore support is unequivocal in nature.

Contributions, Limitations, and Future Directions
This study provides important contributions to the literature. First, polling data, the popular press, and various scholars all point to increasingly positive attitudes toward sexual minorities as evidence of widespread change. We do not doubt that change has occurred, but our work calls into question the magnitude of the transformations. Although many people express authentic positive attitudes toward sexual minorities in general, others might make explicit shows of support while still maintaining implicit forms of prejudice. Social condemnations of expressing explicit prejudice (Campbell, 1947; McCormack & Anderson, 2010), coupled with the interacting effects of dual attitudes (Wilson et al., 2000), likely contribute to this occurrence.

Second, most of the research focusing on attitudes toward LGBT persons has focused on prejudice. This prompted Savin-Williams et al.’s (2010) call “for researchers to transcend conventional explorations that focused solely on the negative attitudes toward sexual and gender minorities” (p. 371). We did so by considering the nature of supportive attitudes and the antecedents thereof. Our multilevel model is unique and suggests a variety of factors serve to influence people’s attitudes. One particularly noteworthy finding was the role of religion—a macro-level factor traditionally considered to be an antecedent of prejudice (Finlay & Walther, 2003; Schulte & Battle, 2004; Whitley, 2009). Although we did observe this in some cases, other people used their religious beliefs to justify and explain their support of LGBT coaches. This finding is unique to the literature and shows that what might otherwise be a taken-for-granted relationship (the role of religion in negative attitudes toward sexual minorities) sometimes warrants further consideration.
Despite the contributions of the study, there are potential limitations. First, some might perceive the sample size \( n = 10 \) as small and therefore a limiting factor in how these findings can be applied elsewhere. Second, in our interview questions, we lumped lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender coaches into a single group. We did this because (a) that is a common practice (see for example, the language used by advocacy groups, such as the Human Rights Campaign, http://www.hrc.org); and (b) we were interested in understanding the nature of parents’ support for sexual minority coaches in general. We recognize, however, potential limitations with this approach. For instance, Griffin (2012) has suggested that although the “T” is frequently included in the LGBT acronym, many people do not consciously consider transgender individuals; thus, they consider sexual orientation but not gender identity or expression. Our findings would seem to support this, as the participants mentioned lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals, but not those who are transgender. Further, there is some evidence that support for sexual minorities might differ among lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals (Anderson, 2011a). With our approach, we were unable to tease out these potential differences. Finally, given the influence of religion on people’s attitudes, it would have been helpful to also ask about their religious affiliation and religiosity, but this was not done.

We also see several areas for future research. First, in addressing some of the potential study limitations, we see value in future research investigating people’s attitudes toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals, separately, as opposed to a collective (as done in this study). In addition, there is need for further exploration in different regions around the world. Our participants lived in both rural and urban areas, but were all in the United States. It is possible that the multilevel influences would vary among parents in Europe or Asia, as two examples. Finally, given these intriguing findings, there is a need to understand the degree to which the multilevel factors can be used to facilitate attitudinal change among people who express sexual prejudice.

Endnotes

1 Matthew Shepard was a gay man who was abducted by two men, tied to a post in a remote area of Wyoming, beaten, and left for dead. He died five days later. This horrific occurrence garnered international attention and spurred the passing of hate crime legislation. For more information, see www.matthewshepard.org.

References


Cunningham, G.B., & Melton, E.N. (2013). Contact with lesbian and gay friends moderates the relationships among religious fundamentalism, sexism, and sexual prejudice.


