Who Are the Champions? Using a Multilevel Model to Examine Perceptions of Employee Support for LGBT Inclusion in Sport Organizations

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Sport employees who champion LGBT inclusion efforts represent key elements in creating accepting environments within college athletic departments. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to examine the concept of champions and how they support LGBT individuals within heterosexist sport environments. Drawing from divergent literatures, including that related to organizational inclusion and championing behaviors, we explore how a combination of factors from multiple levels may influence sport employees’ attitude and behaviors related to LGBT inclusion, and determine how supportive behaviors influence sexual minorities working within a college athletic department. Results indicate that various macro- (i.e., culture of sport, athletic boosters, university and community values, exposure to diverse cultures) meso- (organizational culture, presence of other champions), and micro- (demographics, open-mindedness, experiences with sexual minorities) level factors influenced the level of employee support for LGBT inclusive policies. Furthermore, power meaningfully influenced these dynamics, such that employees who did not resemble prototypically sport employees (i.e., White, heterosexual, male) were hesitant to show support for LGBT equality. However, those who did champion LGBT inclusive initiatives successfully modeled supportive behaviors and positive attitudes toward LGBT individuals, vocally opposed discriminatory treatment, and provided sexual minorities with a safe space within sport. The authors discuss implications and future directions.

While there have been notable improvements in recent years, many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) employees within the sport context continue to face sexual prejudice and oftentimes must operate within heterosexist cultures (Griffin, 2012). For instance, lesbian coaches and athletes frequently encounter heterosexist environments within women’s sport—compelling many of these women to conceal their sexual identity and portray themselves in ultra-feminine (and thus, presumably heterosexual) manners (Krane 2001; Krane & Barber, 2005). Sadly, disclosing one’s sexual orientation, or failing to appear heterosexual, may result in a number of negative outcomes (Griffith & Hebl, 2002). Specifically, research suggests sexual minorities are oftentimes harassed, negatively stereotyped, and socially excluded in team or work settings—experiences their heterosexual counterparts do not typically encounter (Melton & Cunningham, 2012a; Krane, 1997; Griffin, 1998). Although much of the extant sport literature focuses primarily on athletic settings, empirical examinations of gay sport industry professionals (Cavalier, 2011), and women (presumed to be lesbian) working within health and kinesiology departments (Sartore & Cunningham, 2009b, 2010) have reported similar findings. Furthermore, expressions of sexual prejudice stem from a number of sources, including coaches (Melton & Cunningham, 2012a), athletes (Anderson, 2005; Sartore & Cunningham 2009a), parents of athletes (Sartore & Cunningham 2009a), athletic administrators and sport employees (Melton & Cunningham, 2012a; 2014), fans (Anderson, 2002), faculty members (Sartore & Cunningham, 2010), and future sport management professionals (Gill Morrow, Collins, Lucey, & Schultz, 2006). Collectively, these studies point to the urgency of efforts to ensure sport becomes a more welcoming and supportive place for sexual minorities.

While sport management researchers have documented the prevalence of sexual prejudice in sport and the negative experiences sexual minorities encounter as a result of such attitudes, limited work explores how
sport organizations can create more inclusive environments. However, there is some evidence to support the notion that the attitudes and actions of sport employees can effectively create more inclusive sport environments and can be a tremendous source of support for sexual minorities—even in the absence of formal, organizational support (e.g., nondiscrimination polices based on sexual orientation or gender identity). For instance, athletes in Fink, Burton, Farrell, and Parker’s (2012) study expressed how having even one supportive teammate, coach, or administrator made a considerable difference in how they dealt with their identity disclosure experience. Research within the management and organizational psychology literature also points to the importance of employee support. According to Herscovitch and Meyer (2002), organizational change initiatives are more successful when employees act as champions for the cause.

With respect to supporting sexual minorities in the workplace, Martinez and Hebl (2010) argue champions who are heterosexual can be particularly powerful and essential advocates for LGBT inclusion, as these individuals do not have a stigmatizing identity. Sexual orientation is a relevant issue in the sport context, as heterosexual employees traditionally have more power and privilege, potentially making them effective leaders for change. Furthermore, the supportive attitudes and actions they display not only set an example for appropriate behavior, but can also successfully persuade others to adopt more inclusive mindsets (Martinez & Hebl, 2010). Collectively, the aforementioned research suggests sport employees who champion LGBT inclusion efforts may represent key elements in creating more accepting workplaces within college athletics.

A review of the literature suggests that while a number of studies examine the perpetrators and consequences of sexual prejudice in sport, few scholarly investigations consider the sources of acceptance and inclusion of sexual minorities. The purpose of the study, therefore, is to remedy this shortcoming by examining the concept of heterosexual champions (or allies) for LGBT inclusion and how they support LGBT individuals within the heterosexist environment of college athletics. In drawing from divergent literatures, including that related to organizational inclusion (Avery, 2011; Ely & Thomas, 2001; Shore et al., 2011), and championing behaviors (Cunningham & Sartore, 2010; Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002), we (a) explore how a combination of factors from multiple levels may influence sport employees’ attitude and behaviors related to LGBT inclusion, and (b) determine how supportive behaviors influence sexual minorities working within a college athletic department. Insights related to sport employee support for LGBT inclusion adds to the literature in a number of ways. First, it can enhance our understanding as to why sport employees do or do not advocate for greater inclusion in college athletics, why they may strengthen or cease their efforts, and how their behaviors challenge or reinforce heterosexist cultures. In addition, several sport management scholars (Chalip, 2006; Costa, 2005; Frisby, 2005) urge researchers to examine what is unique about the sport industry, explore potential boundary conditions for current theory, and address what areas warrant change efforts, especially for marginalized populations. The current study answers this call as it can provide valuable insight regarding the unique nature of sport. Specifically, there seems to be distinctive aspects about the culture of the sport industry (e.g., heterosexist norms, values of prototypical sport leaders) that create barriers to LGBT inclusion and limit the experience of sexual minorities. In the following space, we provide an overview of our conceptual framework and then present specific research questions.
Factors Affecting Support for LGBT Inclusion

One aim of the study was to understand what factors influence employees’ support for LGBT inclusion, particularly when working in heterosexist sport environments. When examining attitudes and behaviors, a number of sport scholars encourage researchers to use frameworks that incorporate a variety of perspectives, rather than rely on a single lens to explore the phenomena (Cunningham, 2010b; Dixon & Bruening, 2005; 2007). As such, we draw from a variety of frameworks in an effort to explore the macro- (societal), meso- (organizational), and micro- (individual) level factors that may impact supportive behaviors. Adopting a multilevel perspective lets researchers to address’s how macro levels may influence meso- or micro-level factors, or how micro factors impact meso- or macro-level factors. For example, a collection of individual attitudes might change an organizational culture. Thus, the advantage of using a multilevel perspective is that it allows researchers to develop a more holistic picture and provides them the “best opportunity to understand, explain, and solve problems” (Dixon & Bruening, 2007, p. 381).

Macro-Level Factors  Macro-level factors are those that manifest at the societal level, but can still exert considerable influence on individual attitudes and behaviors. These factors include prevailing norms, customs, and ideals (Herak, 2009). With respect to the current study, a number of theoretical and empirical arguments support the notion that sport is a “cultural institution that reinforces and perpetuates hegemonic masculinity and normative heterosexuality” (Fink et al., 2012, p. 83). The sport culture dictates what is appropriate behavior for males and females through the use of gendered language, values, and ideals that are accepted as “natural” and valid (Messner, 2009). For example, Messner (2002) contends “Boys (in sport) learn early that to be gay, to be suspected of being gay, or even to be unable to prove one’s heterosexual status is not acceptable” (p. 37). Similarly, females are taught to present themselves as heterosexual or hyper-feminine to avoid the negative consequences that occur when failing to do so (Sartore & Cunningham 2009b; Fink et al., 2012). Given that the sport culture is pervasive and entrenched, particularly in revenue-generating sports such as football and basketball, athletic department employees may be hesitant to challenge the status quo by supporting LGBT inclusion.

The culture of the surrounding community may also shape people’s attitudes toward inclusion (Cunningham, 2012a). While researchers have not examined community climate specifically, recent studies that report sport is becoming more accepting for LGBT individuals tend to be conducted in more progressive areas (see Bush, Anderson, & Carr, 2012; Fink et al., 2012). In contrast, when the context of the study is in a more conservative community, LGBT athletes and employees continue to face prejudice and discrimination within the athletic department (Melton & Cunningham, 2012; Cunningham, 2010a, 2012). It is possible that similar patterns are operating in our study, such that a sport employees’ support or resistance of LGBT inclusion is a function of macro-level factors.

Meso-Level Factors  Meso-level factors operate at the organizational or group level and can also influence attitudes and behaviors. When examining meso-level factors that relate to diversity and inclusion initiatives, researchers typically focus on organizational characteristics (King & Cortina, 2010). For example, organizational culture refers to the pattern of shared values, beliefs, and norms that organizational members develop over time (Schein, 1990). In most instances, the organization’s culture will dictate employee behaviors and serve as a model for newcomers to know what is appropriate conduct in the workplace. Several researchers have examined the impact of culture in regards to diversity and inclusion initiatives in sport organizations (DeSensi, 1995; Doherty & Cheladurai, 1999; Fink & Pastore, 1999). This literature suggests that when diversity is not valued in the workplace, the organization’s culture will evolve around the norms and preferences of those who have traditionally held leadership positions in sport organizations—specifically, White, heterosexual males. Thus, persons working in an inclusive culture might be more willing to express support for sexual minorities.

The actions of leaders and coworkers are also meso-level factors that can play a vital role in shaping employees attitudes toward LGBT inclusion. Their attitudes, behaviors, and policies they support establish a model for others to follow in the organization. Bandura (1986), in presenting his social learning theory, noted, “virtually all learning phenomena, resulting from direct experience, can occur vicariously by observing other people’s behaviors and the consequences for them” (p. 19). Thus, when a leader or coworker expresses explicit or implicit negative attitudes toward sexual minorities, it is likely that others in the organization will as well.

Several theoretical and empirical arguments have advanced this idea. For instance, research suggests leaders can inspire coworkers to champion diversity initiatives (Author, 2010) and also discourage them from exhibiting prejudice (Umphress, Simmons, Boswell, & Triana, 2008). As one example, in Umphress et al.’s (2008) study, even when employees held prejudice attitudes, they did not act in discriminatory ways when specifically instructed by their supervisors not to do so. The influence of coworkers can act in similar ways, as Cunningham and Sartore (2010) observed that employees were more likely to champion diversity initiatives when
they perceived their coworkers showed high levels of support for diversity. In addition, coworker support can be especially important if employees are dissatisfied with the organizational practices. For instance, Zhou and George (2001) found employees were more likely to voice their frustration and suggest improvements to organizational polices when the amount of perceived coworker support was high. In this vein, employees who oppose noninclusive behaviors may be willing to speak out against discriminatory actions if they believe others in the organization share their concerns. These examples illustrate that meso-level factors (i.e., those operating at the group and interpersonal level) potentially affect sport employee’s attitudes toward LGBT inclusion.

**Micro-Level Factors** Finally, micro-level forces that may influence employee level support for LGBT inclusiveness are those that are unique to the individual. According to national surveys, fieldwork, and laboratory experiments, negative attitudes toward sexual minorities consistently correlates with several demographic characteristics such as age, gender, race, religious affiliation, and level of education (see Herek, 2009). Specifically, those who express sexual prejudice are more likely to be male, older, less educated, hold fundamentalist or conservative religious beliefs, and describe themselves as politically conservative (Herek, 2009).

These trends have implications for the current study. Specifically, it is reasonable to assume that those who hold negative attitudes toward sexual minorities will be less prone to actively support LGBT-inclusive policies and practices in the workplace. Furthermore, those who do not share these characteristics may be more inclined to support LGBT inclusiveness. Such reasoning is consistent with research that suggests women and those who have more liberal political leanings generally support LGBT rights, such as marriage equality (Herek, 2009; Vesco & Biernat, 2003).

In sum, the framework presented above is one that uses a multilevel approach to explore the various factors that may influence a sport employee’s support for LGBT inclusion in college athletics. Specifically, macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors are thought to enhance or discourage one’s endorsement of inclusive policies and practices. This model helped guide the current investigation, which drew from the perspectives of LGBT sport employees to examine the characteristics of inclusive work environments in college athletics. The views expressed by the participants assisted in answering the following research questions:

**RQ1:** Which sport employees support LGBT inclusion within a college athletic department?

**RQ2:** Why do sport employees express support? Specifically, what macro-, meso-, and micro-factors influence sport employees’ support for LGBT inclusion and their LGBT colleagues in the workplace?

**RQ3:** How can sport employees create more LGBT-inclusive work environments within college athletics?

### Methods

A multimethod, qualitative approach was appropriate in this study to garner a greater understanding of the employees’ perception of inclusion. The current research involved using participant observation, interviews, and analysis of secondary documents to investigate the particular case. In addition, a four-step process was used to enhance the trustworthiness of the study, limit researcher bias, and allow a means for triangulation of the data. Further, in an attempt to enhance the validity of the findings, the authors engaged in constant discussion and collaboration during the data collection process. Adopting this method allowed the authors to develop a more complete understanding of the phenomena (i.e., support for LGBT inclusion), while also enabling the distinctiveness of the participants and the context to be taken into account during the research process (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

The first step of the investigation involved educating the researchers on issues related to workplace inclusion for LGBT employees. This involved extensively reviewing the literature related to LGBT inclusion in the workplace and research focusing on experiences of LGBT employees in sport, interviewing scholars who research LGBT issues, examining newspaper and magazine articles discussing sexual minorities and heterosexual allies in sport, and tracking social media outlets that aim to educate and promote awareness of LGBT issues in sport. During the initial exploration, notes and memos were recorded in an effort to organize and process all available information. This process was instrumental in developing the conceptual framework used in the study. Specifically, the authors realized that individual, organizational, and societal forces oftentimes influenced whether a person supported LGBT inclusion initiatives. Thus, adopting a multilevel perspective allowed the authors to fully explore the variety of factors that may influence employee support for LGBT inclusion in sport organizations.

The second step involved the first author conducting semistructured interviews with 13 individuals who worked within the athletic department under investigation. Rather than interview heterosexual employees, the authors chose to focus on the perceptions of LGBT sport employees. The decision to use this sample was motivated by a number of reasons. First, to understand how minorities experience the workplace, it is necessary to listen to the words and perspectives of those within the minority group (see Hall, Cullen, & Slack, 1989). If researchers rely on the majority’s account of LGBT inclusion, they may misrepresent the organizational reality of LGBT sport employees, or neglect to identify significant issues that impact the work lives of these individuals. Furthermore, an employee may believe her or his actions foster an accepting work environment, but may do little to actually create a more inclusive workplace for employees who are LGBT. Second, a review of literature related to individual support for LGBT inclusion revealed that most studies only sample heterosexuals who self-identify as allies or advocates. While one might assume these allies...
that affirms diversity of all persons as well as diversity
recognize its responsibility to create and maintain a climate
Research Setting
This research took place at a large, public university in the
and advocates are making concerted efforts to promote
LGBT equality, it is also reasonable to suggest they may inadvertently overstate their resolve. Consider,
for instance, that although most public opinion polls
projected California voters would reject Proposition 8
(a state constitutional amendment limiting marriage to
one man and one woman), the election results brought
an end to six months of marriage equality for same-
sex couples (Lewis & Gossett, 2011). Similarly, since
2009, American opinion polls indicate that a majority
of Americans support same-sex marriage; however,
until 2012, state legislated marriage equality laws rarely
exist when they were subject to a popular vote (Lewis
& Gossett, 2011). Given the aforementioned literature,
the authors interviewed LGBT sport employees in an
effort to understand these individuals’ workplace reality
and identity issues they consider imperative in creating
LGBT-inclusive work environments.

As a third step in data collection, the authors
reviewed participants’ emails and personal text messages
they had received from supervisors and coworkers. In
some of these documents coworkers were asking about
the participant’s significant other; whereas other emails
revealed that noninclusive language was often used in
department emails from top administrators. For example,
significant others or partners were never mentioned in
invitations, only “husbands and wives” were invited to
athletic department functions. Many times participants
decided to show the first author these documents after
they were asked to further explain what they meant by
“small things” that made them feel more or less included
in the workplace.

Finally, four of the participants allowed the first
author to observe a typical workday. On such instances,
the first author was able to observe how the participant
interacted with various coworkers, and in turn, how cer-
tain coworkers treated the participant. Each participant
worked in a different department (i.e., academic services,
compliance, marketing, and a women’s athletic team)
so the first author was able to experience four distinct
work settings within the athletic department. During the
observation days, field notes and memos were taken to
bolster other data collection methods. In some respects
it seemed as if the participants allowed the first author
to review personal documents (i.e., emails and text mes-
ges) and visit the workplace because they wanted to
substantiate what they had said in the interview. They did
want the first author to think they were exaggerating or
dramatizing what was happening in the workplace. For
instance, Josh told the first author, “You can come see for
yourself. You’ll be able to get a feel for how things are.”

in views. As such, the university has made considerable
efforts with respect to increasing the diversity of the
student body and faculty. And, while the school has made
vast improvements in terms of racial and gender diversity,
it still struggles to create a campus environment that is
welcoming for individuals who are LGBT.

To provide a more inclusive atmosphere on campus,
the university has implemented several programs to sup-
port LGBT students, faculty, and staff. For example, there
is now an LGBT resources center, which “educates all
campus and community constituencies on LGBT issues
through programming about sexual orientation and
gender identity/expression, advocacy, leadership, and vis-
ibility.” In addition to providing a “safe space” on campus
for persons who are LGBT, the center also works with
other student organizations, departments on campus, and
local community organizations to ensure students have
access to a number of resources, activities, and support
services. There are also two social organizations, one for
students and one for faculty and staff that offer LGBT
individuals an opportunity to form connections and
relationships with similar others on campus. Finally, the
university also supports an “ally” group that is composed
of students, faculty and staff, and community members
who are willing to provide support for LGBT people or
others dealing with sexual orientation issues. Despite
such advances, the Princeton Review’s annual lists of the
most and least gay-friendly universities continue to
rank State University as one of the most unsupportive
campuses for sexual monitories. The rating is determined
by asking students to indicate their level of agreement
from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) with the
statement, “Students, faculty, and administrators at my
school treat all person equally regardless of their sexual
orientation and gender identity/expression.”

In terms of LGBT inclusive polices within the ath-
etic department, there is a formal statement that reads
“no athlete or athletic department staff member will be
discriminated on the basis of race, creed, color, sex, reli-
gion, national origin, age, disability, veterans’ or marital
status, sexual orientation, or any other protected group
status.” Also, a new committee has recently been formed
to address ways the athletic department may better serve
the needs of LGBT athletes. However, according to par-
ticipant accounts, the athletic department as a whole has
done little to promote LGBT inclusiveness, and none of
the participants felt they could freely express their sexual
orientation to everyone in the department.

Participants
The first author conducted interviews with 13 coaches
and staff who worked in a variety of departmental units.
The participants were mostly female (61.5%), White
(84.6%), and had earned an advanced degree (57.2%).
They ranged in age from 25 to 43 years (M = 31.49; SD
= 5.46) and had all worked in the athletic department for
a significant amount of time (M = 5.32; SD = 2.87). Nine
of the participants were in committed relationships and
M = 5.32; SD = 2.87). Nine
four were single. They identified as lesbian \((n = 7)\), gay \((n = 5)\), or bisexual \((n = 1)\). All of the employees had disclosed their sexual orientation to at least one other staff member. To respect the participants’ concern for anonymity, pseudonyms are used in the findings section. Table 1 (see Appendix) provides additional descriptive information.

Procedures

Participants were recruited through a modified snowball sampling method (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Specifically, we contacted individuals we knew met the selection criteria for the study and asked if they would be willing to participate. To be considered for the study, participants must (a) identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, and (b) work within the athletic department. The individuals identified were then emailed a letter describing the purpose of the study. The letter explained exactly what would be required of the participants and stated the Human Subject Review Board had reviewed and approved the investigation. Those who were interested were instructed to contact the first author, and to also provide names of other individuals they knew who met the participant selection criteria and would be willing to participate. In sum, 13 people were willing to participate in the study, and subsequent face-to-face interviews were scheduled. All interviews were between 60 and 90 minutes in length. To ensure a safe, comfortable space for the participants, each person chose an off-campus location for the interview.

Interview Guide

The interview guide was developed with the intent of capturing the participants’ perceptions and experiences regarding LGBT inclusion in the workplace. Specifically, we sought to understand what inclusion meant to LGBT employees, their personal experiences with individuals who had made them feel included in the workplace, and their perception of who and how individuals made the workplace more LGBT inclusive. Questions either pertained directly to the multilevel framework (e.g., Can you describe the characteristics of individuals who support LGBT inclusion at work?), or were framed in a more general way (e.g., How do you define inclusion? Have you experienced an inclusive workplace? If so, can you describe it?). The latter approach was taken to elicit responses that could provide more understanding and insight regarding employee support for LGBT inclusiveness (cf. Kvale, 1996). Taking this approach allowed the first author to extend beyond the preconceived theoretical image of the employee supporter and develop a sense of how the social world appeared to those under investigation (Patton, 1987). The interview guide also consisted of questions regarding perceptions of employee support from the participant’s perspective (e.g., What does employee support mean to you? When do you feel supported by your coworkers?

Do your coworkers or supervisors support LGBT inclusion? Which coworkers are more likely to support LGBT inclusion? What behaviors are more or less successful in creating a more inclusive workplace environment? Why do you think some employees support LGBT inclusion and others do not?)

Data Analysis

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Throughout the data collection process, data were continuously analyzed and placed in open (raw data themes), axial (first-order themes), and selective coding categories (higher order themes) in an effort to evaluate the participants’ perceptions of employee support for LGBT inclusion (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Word files of interview transcripts, memos, field notes, and secondary documents (e.g., participants’ emails and text messaging conversations) were stored and coded using NVivo 9 software. Initially, the first author went line by line through the transcripts to identify emerging views. In sum, there were 53 raw data themes (free nodes) created during the open coding process. The second author reviewed the quotations and codes to further strengthen the dependability of the findings.

Table 2 further illustrates the data analysis process. Specifically, the table displays representative quotations of the raw data themes (free nodes). Next, it shows the authors combined the raw data themes into 14 first-order themes (trees) to further represent the data. For example, raw codes such as “diversity equals race and gender”, “top administrations neglect LGBT issues”, and “LGBT issues not discussed at work” were grouped together in the theme “limited culture of diversity”. The themes were grouped into five higher order themes using concepts in the theoretical framework as a guide. Such an approach is consistent with an a priori, content-specific approach to data analysis (Schwandt, 2007), in which codes are “developed from careful study of the problem or topic under investigation and the theoretical interests that drive the inquiry” (p. 32). If a higher order theme did not appear in the theoretical framework, the decision to include it in the findings was made according to the frequency of occurrence in the data. Finally, through a process of discussion and debate, the authors selected representative quotes that synthesized the most prevalent themes in the data and presented an accurate account of the participants’ perceptions and experiences.

In addition, several steps were taken to improve credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings. First, considering limited research examines employee support for LGBT inclusive policies, two scholars who research LGBT issues served as peer debriefers. The advice they provided was quite valuable when originally developing the theoretical framework for this study. In addition, their knowledge and expertise enhanced the dependability of the interview guide and helped create interview questions that (a) reflected the theoretical framework and (b) also made it possible to capture the unique experiences of the participants. Second, the first author recorded
notes in reflexive journal throughout the investigation to monitor personal positions and potential bias. This allows for recognition of when the interviewee’s words differed from (a) preconceived impressions of support, and (b) previous research that has examined employee support for inclusion. The first author’s reflections were frequently discussed with the second author during the data collection and analysis process. Finally, to improve credibility, participants were sent a copy of the transcript and given the opportunity to provide clarity and ensure their words and experiences were portrayed accurately. None of the participants voiced any issues or concerns regarding their transcripts.

**Findings and Discussion**

Employee support for LGBT-inclusive policies and practices is instrumental in creating a more accepting and inclusive work environments for sexual minorities within college athletics (Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Martinez & Hebl, 2010; Ragins, 2008). Coworkers can provide needed assurance and affirmation during the coming out process (Ragins, 2008), create safe havens where LGBT employees feel free to express their sexual identity (Ragins, 2004; Fink et al., 2012), and become vocal advocates for LGBT equality in the workplace (Martinez & Hebl, 2010; Russell, 2011). Results from this study certainly demonstrate employees’ perceptions regarding the benefits of this type of support; however, and of equal importance, they also highlight the perceived forces that influence whether a sport employee will support or resist LGBT inclusion in the workplace. Higher order themes pertaining to sport employee support for LGBT inclusion include: (a) definition of inclusiveness, (b) micro-level factors, (c) meso-level factors, (d) macro-level factors (e) power and status, and (f) friends versus champions of inclusion. Each of these is described in further detail below (see Figure 1 for an illustrative summary).

**Definition of Inclusiveness**

According to workplace inclusion literature (Shore et al., 2011; Ely & Thomas, 2001), diverse employees feel accepted and included when their needs for belongingness and uniqueness are satisfied by their membership in the work group. Consistent with this view, when asked how they would describe inclusion in the workplace, all of the participants discussed needing to feel as though they belonged in the work group, were accepted by others, and received equal treatment. However, only two of the participants felt that their coworkers should view their sexual orientation as unique in order to create accepting work atmospheres. In fact, many times the participants’ definitions stated how one’s sexual orientation should not be significant. For instance, when describing inclusive work groups, John noted “for me, the department is inclusive when people don’t care if you’re gay or not. It’s just a non-issue.” Jimmy desired a somewhat more affirming environment, but still did not believe the organization needed to value sexual orientation diversity. Rather, he simply wanted to be treated in the same way heterosexual employees were treated:

I just want my coworkers and the athletic department to be okay with me being gay, and show that it’s okay that I’m gay. Give domestic partner insurance benefits, let my boyfriend go on the “spouse” away game trip with me. I don’t think they need a gay appreciation day at work or something like that. Just give me the same rights and luxuries that my straight coworkers have.

In many respects, the participants may not have seen their sexual orientation as a valued characteristic because they had never worked in sport organizations that effectively communicated the value of diversity, which is not uncommon in the sport industry (Cunningham & Melton, 2011). This might help explain why having diverse employees does not automatically translate into performance gains for athletic departments (see Cunningham, 2011a, 2011b). For instance, employees may be unable to effectively use the advantages of having diversity because they (minority and majority group members) do not realize how diversity can enhance organizational outcomes (for similar arguments, see Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999). As such, athletic departments should focus more attention to understanding, and then communicating, the benefits of diversity.

Given that many of the participants had never worked in an athletic department with formal LGBT-inclusive policies, participants assessed the attitudes and actions of supportive coworkers and supervisors to determine the level of inclusiveness in the organization. For example, Tanya believed the department was inclusive if individuals showed explicit or implicit signs of acceptance:

I was really worried before my interview that I wouldn’t fit it. I knew about the culture here and knew it wasn’t exactly gay-friendly. … When I came on my interview everyone was great, they were really nice and didn’t say any over-the-top homophobic comments (laughs). And I noticed one of the (specific job title) had an ally sticker on her door. So I knew there was at least one person who supported gays and lesbians.

Tanya’s concluding comment suggests the presence of just one LGBT supporter can make a significant impact regarding whether LGBT individuals feel included in the sport setting.

**Micro-Level Factors**

To gain a better understanding of which individuals were perceived to be more likely to support LGBT inclusion, participants were asked to describe people who were supportive or accepting of LGBT people or who acted as allies in the workplace. For the purposes of this investigation, an ally was described as an individual who, regardless of sexual orientation, advocated for LGBT rights and equality. Though perhaps surprising, all of the participants had received support, to varying degrees, from
### Table 2 Quotes, First Order Themes, and Higher Order Themes Generated from Data Collection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Representative Quotations from Raw Data</th>
<th>First Order Themes (Trees)</th>
<th>Higher Order Themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Being gay does not define me.”</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sexuality is not an issue (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It’s not like I want a prize for being gay, just want to be seen like everyone else”</td>
<td></td>
<td>Coworkers create inclusion (13)</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I want to be treated like everyone else”</td>
<td></td>
<td>Definition of Inclusiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“If your gay, queer, bi, lesbian, it doesn’t matter.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I want to feel like I belong in the group, like people want me to be part of the team.”</td>
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<td>“It would be nice if my coworkers respected my sexuality.”</td>
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<td>“I think being gay is cool. I wish everybody thought it was cool.”</td>
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<td>“If my coworkers accept me for who I am, I’m fine.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Little things can go a long way. Like going through ally training, voluntarily sitting through 3 hours of training shows you care.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“The people your around everyday are the people who really determine if you feel included or not.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Athletics isn’t a place where I think men can support gay issues. It’s too macho masculine.”</td>
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<td>Gender (10)</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Men just talk that way, they don’t think anything of calling a guy a fag.”</td>
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<td>Liberal/Open-minded (13)</td>
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<tr>
<td>“For the most part, all the women in my department try to be supportive.”</td>
<td></td>
<td>Experiences with LGBT individuals (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I think the women in my department just care more about being fair to everyone. Maybe because they know what it’s like to be discriminated against.”</td>
<td></td>
<td>Micro-Level Factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“My cool coworkers are all open-minded.”</td>
<td></td>
<td>Limited culture of diversity (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It’s the open-minded liberals who are usually the most accepting. Like real acceptance, not love the sinner, hate the sin.”</td>
<td></td>
<td>Support of others (12)</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Well, my coworkers that have gay family members or friends tend to care more (about LGBT-inclusion).”</td>
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<td>“The more they (coworkers) have gotten to know me, the more they have changed what the say and how they act. Their more considerate (concerning issues related to LGBT-inclusion).”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“The athletic department doesn’t care (about LGBT inclusion).”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“No one ever talks about GLBT issues, ever. Diversity is race and gender, period.”</td>
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<td>“It might make a difference if the AD addressed the issue, but he isn’t going to touch such a sensitive subject.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“The more accepting people you have the more people expect others to be accepting. It’s kind of like peer pressure to be nice.”</td>
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<td>“If your boss says this is the way we treat people, then I think most people will fall in line. But if your boss doesn’t say anything, or acts like he or she doesn’t care, people will do what they want.”</td>
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</table>
“It’s just the way it (sport) is. It’s hard to change.”
“The community is really conservative and the university reflect the community.”
“My coworkers are always there for me no matter what.”
“I can go to my coworkers with any problem.”
“They act like nothing is different, treat me like they would anyone else.”
“They’re cool with me, but I don’t think they are going to march in any pride parades.”
“They support me, but they don’t see how they can help. Maybe they don’t want to, or don’t think it’s their place to advocate for our (LGBT) rights.”
“For things to get better we need straight people to fight for LGBT rights.”
“It’s going to take someone who is straight and who recognizes the need for fair treatment for gays and lesbians to make a difference.”
“I think it means more when someone who isn’t gay says equality is important.”
“Gays and lesbians and straight people have to work together. It’s sad, but most AD’s won’t get behind their lesbian and gay coaches unless they are forced to. They have to be pressured to do the right thing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culture of sport (5)</th>
<th>University and community values (13)</th>
<th>Exposure to diverse cultures (field notes)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coworkers provide emotional or social support (11)</td>
<td>Need for change agents or vocal advocates (12)</td>
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Note: Number of participants who discussed the first order theme is in parenthesis.
their coworkers—even though the athletic department made very few attempts to incorporate LGBT issues into their diversity strategy. When asked what qualities supportive individuals displayed, the participants discussed a variety of micro-level factors, including gender, political orientation, perceived level of open-mindedness, and their coworkers' past experiences with sexual minorities.

Overall, employees who supported LGBT inclusiveness at State University tended to be female, raised in progressive areas of the country, and politically liberal. In fact, as the participants recounted instances when coworkers had been particularly supportive of sexual minorities, 23 different women were identified as being supportive of LGBT issues in the athletic department, but only four men were mentioned. When asked why she felt women were more understanding of LGBT issues, Blakely expressed, “I think women are just more comfortable with it (one’s LGBT sexual identity).” Sarah also added, “I think women understand the importance of fair and equal treatment at work. They are more aware of it than men.” In addition, one participant felt women in his department were more comfortable around gay men than lesbians and therefore were more accepting of gay males. As John describes:

For the most part, all the women I work with are totally fine with me being gay. They think nothing of it. Some of the men have a problem with it, or I think they think I shouldn’t be so open with it or something like that. But, I think the women are the same way toward lesbians in a way … Maybe they think lesbians are going to hit on them.

John’s opinion that heterosexual, female coworkers prefer to associate with gay males instead of lesbians was unique to the data, as most of the female participants described women as showing more support for LGBT inclusion than men.

In addition to women, the participants also mentioned coworkers who were liberal or who were from more progressive areas of the country tended to behave in ways that created a more inclusive work environment. As Mia explains:

The allies I know are all liberal or they grew up in a liberal part of the country … Like Paige, she grew up in California; she’s like your typical tree-hugging liberal, supports Obama, just a huge Democrat …

The other day we were all at lunch and someone brought up Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell and said they thought it was good and needed to stay … When he said it, Paige immediately jumped on her soapbox and told the guy how gay marriage should be legal and how gays and lesbians should have the same rights as straight people … Then, our boss, who served in the military but has never said anything about Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, chimed in and said it should be repealed and it’s a stupid policy.

Paige’s reaction is significant for two reasons. First, she instantly responded to a coworker who voiced support for a policy that has now been deemed discriminatory and overturned by the federal government—setting an example for how to support LGBT inclusion. Second, by publically rebuking her coworker, she also inspired their supervisor to express his support for LGBT equality.

Open-Minded Having an “open mind” was also a recurring theme within the data. In fact, all of the participants described supportive employees as “having an open mind” or being “open-minded”, which is consistent with previous research examining individual support policies that ensure LGBT equality (Flynn, 2005). Participants further explained how being open-minded and accepting differed from being tolerant of homosexuality, in that the
open-minded individuals they encountered at work did not view homosexuality as a sin or as a conscious choice. As Sarah noted: “People who are open-minded are more accepting of gays and lesbians. They don’t judge you. They’re open to the possibility that people are just gay; we don’t choose to be gay.

The first author’s field observations also reinforced the theme of open-mindedness, as certain supportive coworkers seemed to overtly display this quality. For example, John introduced the first author to a number of his coworkers and explained the purpose of the research project. Upon hearing this information, the coworkers who were described as “open-minded” were eager to discuss an array of diverse issues with the first author (e.g., politics, religion) and had a desire to learn new perspectives related to inclusion. Furthermore, many of the open-minded coworkers had decorated their offices with artwork, quotes, or books that reflected their interest in a variety of topics.

Implicit cues of one’s openness can be meaningful for sport employees who work within athletic departments that may seem unwelcoming for sexual minorities. For instance, employees who do want to (or feel they cannot) overtly show support for LGBT issues may signal their inclusive mindset by discussing divergent points of view with coworkers, or by how they decorate their office. While Anderson’s (2009) work suggests sport is now a more open and affirming place for sexual minorities, his research is generally situated in more progressive areas (i.e., United Kingdom, Los Angeles). Thus, for LGBT sport employees who work in less inclusive environments, subtle signs of acceptance can help direct these employees toward their more supportive coworkers.

**Experiences With LGBT Individuals**

Research examining the motivations of heterosexual allies also suggests many people advocate for LGBT individuals because they have a family member or close friend who is LGBT (Russell, 2011). Consistent with previous examinations, participants in the current study revealed how a person’s experiences or relationships with LGBT individuals may influence her or his willingness to support LGBT equality. Perhaps more interesting, several participants believed their coworkers became allies after they developed a friendship with the participant and later discovered she or he was LGBT. As Rachel explains:

I’d say James was completely homophobic before he met me. He thought gays were gross, weird, against God, just not acceptable. But, he didn’t know any gay people … After we worked together for a year or so, he still didn’t think he knew any gay people (laughs) … If he ever said anything homophobic, I challenged him on it, and he eventually started to come around … Finally I got the courage to tell him I was gay. And when I did, he was completely supportive, which was really surprising … Now he’s my biggest ally. He goes after anyone who says anything the least bit homophobic.

This example supports Bush, Anderson, and Carr’s (2012) contention that disclosing one’s sexual orientation can be quite beneficial for sexual minorities in sport, and can lead to greater inclusivity. Indeed, without learning that his coworker was lesbian, James may have never become an advocate for LGBT equality and inclusion.

**Meso-Level Factors**

Participants were also asked to discuss organizational (meso-level) factors that may influence one’s support for LGBT inclusion. All of the participants described how the athletic department failed to create inclusion in the workplace because top administrators fostered a culture of indifference toward LGBT issues and concerns. However, 12 of the 13 participants felt this culture was challenged when coworkers explicitly demonstrated their support for inclusivity. Moreover, the participants explained that supportive actions also encouraged others to behave in more inclusive ways.

**Culture of Diversity**

According to Doherty and Chelladurai (1999), sport organizations with a culture of diversity focus on people and respect the differences their employees bring to the department. This culture encourages sport managers to have a greater tolerance for risk and ambiguity, which in turn gives employees the freedom and flexibility to develop new and innovative ways to accomplish tasks. This environment contains open lines of communication, multilevel decision-making systems, and open group membership. In contrast, a culture of similarity views differences as deficits or a source of conflict that will inevitably limit productivity and performance. Consequently, such organizations have closed lines of communication, one-sided decision-making systems, and closed group membership. Managers and employees working within a rigid culture of similarity are typically task oriented (versus people oriented), avoid risk and conflict, and rely on traditional modes of operation when making business decisions.

According to seven of the participants, diversity was seen as a means to an end, rather than a value. Specifically, they discussed how policies were primarily implemented so that the athletic department could avoid discrimination lawsuits, similar to Fink and Pastore’s (1999) description of compliance strategies. For instance, when John was in the process of interviewing job applicants for a vacant position, an associate athletic director told him that he needed to hire a woman to ensure the athletic department was not sued for gender discrimination. Those who were interviewed perceived that this view of diversity inhibited some people from taking proactive steps to create inclusive work environments. As John notes:

The department might say diversity is important, but they don’t do anything to show it. If they did something, anything really, I think more people would support it (LGBT inclusiveness).

Randi also expressed how she believed top administrators only viewed diversity as a way to attract racially diverse athletes to the athletic program:

Our AD doesn’t value diversity; he just knows you have to have it to help recruiting. I think he sees it as
a checklist when hiring someone new. If the person is African-American, check. If she’s a woman, check. If you hire an African-American woman, double check … Gay isn’t on his checklist. If anything, if you hire a lesbian assistant coach it’s considered a mark against you.

Randi’s words also highlight how many times sexual orientation is not a valued diversity dimension in sport. However, some of the smaller units within the athletic department did support all forms of diversity and created policies and statements that reflected such inclusive beliefs. For example Josh, who works within the compliance department, said:

We created our own mission statement, and it specifically states how we respect all types of diversity … We’re just a small department, but we really try to live up to that mission in all we do … It shows in our hiring practices, it shows in the way we treat student-athletes, and it shows in how we treat each other.

Josh’s situation was unique in that all of his immediate coworkers were committed to creating an inclusive workplace. It was apparent during the first author’s field observation that the coworkers’ respect for one another contributed to a strong sense of cohesion within their division. The coworkers seemed to genuinely enjoy each others company, went to lunch together on most work days, and were social outside of the work setting.

Support of Others in the Organization Huffman (2008) and her colleagues contend supervisors and coworkers can be particularly influential in creating more inclusive environments for LGBT employees. Some research also suggests employees look to their leaders for cues on how they should act in regards to diversity initiatives (Avery, 2011). This was certainly the case in the current study, as four of the participants discussed how, in some instances the behavior of their supervisor inspired others to be more supportive of LGBT inclusion. For instance, Shannon shared events that took place after her coworker was required to attend diversity training for saying disparaging remarks about sexual minorities:

I think a lot of good things came out of making Lee attend that diversity sensitivity class. For one, it set the tone that you can’t act that way in our department. And two, people started to talk about it (issues related to sexual orientation diversity). For the first time since I had been there, people were saying we needed to think about what we said, and consider how it affected others.

In addition to supervisors, the attitudes and behaviors of coworkers can also significantly influence employee support for inclusion (Avery, 2011). John discussed how his coworkers, who were also close friends, modeled inclusive behavior for others in the department and rebuked anyone who expressed negative attitudes for sexual minorities:

It’s not easy being an out gay guy in (State University’s) athletic department. But if a couple of your friends stand up for you, you really don’t have many problems. They’ll tell other folks how it is and how it’s going to be.

Though not extensively addressed in the support literature, subordinate support for inclusion can also impact employee behaviors. Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) helps explain why a subordinate would engage in behaviors that demonstrate support for their supervisor. Specifically, if subordinates feel their supervisor is providing them with opportunities, resources, emotional/social support, they are more likely to reciprocate the treatment by showing loyalty to their supervisor. This may be the case in the current study. As Taylor describes:

I think I’m a pretty good boss, but I didn’t know how much my employees liked me until last year … A new student-worker had been saying inappropriate gay jokes and calling people fags. I had heard it, but since everyone knows I’m gay, I didn’t want to be that guy … You know, the one that makes an issue out of being gay … Well, I was told that one of my employees over heard it and completely told the guy off. He said he didn’t want to hear those kinds of comments and he should watch what he says and quit sounding like an uneducated idiot.

When Taylor shared this experience, he believed his subordinate’s loyalty motivated him to engage in championing behaviors; however, subordinates’ views toward inclusion may be what actually inspire them to advocate for LGBT equality. For instance, one of Randi’s top players had been involuntarily “outed” by a teammate and afterward was harassed and treated unfairly by some of the juniors and seniors on the team. Randi explained how the newer members of the team held more progressive views toward homosexuality and did not tolerate the unsupportive behaviors of others on the team:

They confronted the upperclassmen who were being so awful, and told the coaches that we needed to do something to stop what was going on … We held a team meeting with all the players, coaches, and support staff. We made it clear that we were a team and we were going to respect everyone … During the meeting the players set team rules that explained how they would treat their teammates, gay or straight. And, everyone agreed to keep each other accountable. The whole atmosphere on the team changed after that, everyone came together … The players were the ones that made the change. And it really helped me. It made me realize things were getting better and people were becoming more tolerant. It showed me that I had to make sure our team was a place where players felt loved and accepted, not hated.

This powerful example demonstrates how influential individuals can be with respect to creating inclusive environments for LGBT individuals, and also illustrates how micro-level forces can influence meso-level processes. Specifically, the underclassmen changed the culture of the team by demanding that their teammates and coaches create a more accepting environment.
Unfortunately, when there is limited support from others, instances of sexual prejudice may persist in the workplace. As an illustrative example, Ryan explained how two of her coworkers perpetuated a noninclusive work atmosphere by saying disparaging comments:

"Like the least offensive thing they’ll say is someone or something “is so gay.” But I’ve heard them call other (heterosexual) coworkers “queers” or “fags” … They’ve both said you don’t want to work with certain women’s teams because you’ll just be around lesbians, and girls shouldn’t go pro because they’ll be around so many (lesbians) … or worse, they’ll try to turn the girl into a lesbian … I can’t believe anyone would ever say that at work, like no matter how you feel about homosexuality. But no one says anything so they just keep saying that stuff.

Ryan’s experiences demonstrate how the inaction of coworkers also prolongs the problem. Employees do not create inclusion by simply reframing from saying derogatory remarks. Rather, sport employees should model appropriate behaviors in the workplace and diplomatically correct coworkers when they use insensitive or disparaging language.

**Macro-Level Factors**

Macro-level factors are external to the sport organization and can significantly shape an individual’s attitudes and behaviors. In the current study, we identified four macro-level influences—the culture of sport, athletic boosters, the values of the university and surrounding community, and exposure to diverse cultures—and discuss how these forces may impact a sport employee’s willingness to support LGBT inclusion.

**Culture of Sport** As articulated in the conceptual framework, traditional notions of masculinity and normative heterosexuality are deeply entrenched in the sport culture. At times, the pervasiveness of the sport culture renders sport employees and participants incapable of realizing how gendered language, policies, and beliefs influence their perceptions. For instance when asked if her media guide biography should mention her partner, Sarah responded, “Um. No.” When asked why she felt this way she explained, “You never know, it might hurt recruiting. I don’t want to offend anyone.” As a follow-up question, the first author asked Sarah if heterosexual coaches should mention their spouse or children in the team media guide. She replied, “Yeah, I think so. I think parents like that.” Sarah’s responses indicate that even sexual minorities often accept heterosexist practices in sport as perfectly legitimate. There were also examples of how the culture of sport discouraged heterosexual employees from championing inclusion. For instance, several participants discussed how it would be surprising for those working in the football department to be vocal champions for inclusion. Jimmy explained, “They might be cool with it, but they aren’t going to say anything.” Similarly, John noted, “I think on a personal level they are accepting, but working in the hyper-macho football world, they aren’t going to be a loud supporter.”

**Athletic Boosters** Groups that have an invested interest in an athletic department are often referred to as external stakeholders (Freeman, 1984). Athletic boosters represent a significant external stakeholder group in sport, as “they can be a primary source of revenue for the athletic department.” During the interview, Jimmy discussed how athletic administrators make every reasonable effort to ensure boosters are satisfied. He went on to suggest the following:

“You have to be cautious. You don’t want to make your donors angry. They’re typically your old, conservative White guys. They probably won’t like it if you start saying the football team is gay friendly. I’m almost sure they wouldn’t like it.

According to Jimmy, athletic department employees, who fear backlash from athletic donors, may be hesitant to promote LGBT-inclusive policies.

**Culture of the University and Surrounding Community** Several participants also suggested that attitudes toward LGBT inclusion could be heavily influenced by the values and culture of the university and surrounding community. For instance, all of the participants discussed how the majority of students, alumni, and residents in the surrounding community were politically conservative, deeply religious, and promoted traditional values. Subsequently, the university and community culture was quite conservative and unsupportive of LGBT issues. Thus, it is reasonable to argue that this culture, coupled with sport’s history of heterosexism and homo-negative attitudes (Sartore & Cunningham, 2010; Fink et al., 2012) does little to encourage sport employees to promote LGBT inclusion within the athletic department.

**Exposure to Diverse Cultures** The data revealed that exposure to diverse cultures seemed to be another macro-level force that influenced the sport employees’ support for LGBT inclusion. For example, many of the more accepting coworkers were from or had lived in progressive or liberal parts of the county, thereby exposing them to more inclusive cultures. Experiencing diverse cultures also had an impact on other employees. For example, the first author met an employee who was from a small town in the Southern portion of the United States, identified as being politically conservative, and enthusiastically expressed her passion for foreign travel (both in the pictures she displayed in her office and in the conversation she shared with the first author). While one might not expect this person to be an ally, she openly discussed LGBT issues and was described as a vocal supporter and advocate for LGBT rights. Some research suggests her extensive travel and experiences in diverse cultures may have helped shape her more inclusive mindset. Specifically, scholars contend those who travel frequently, particularly when it is abroad, exhibit greater cross-cultural skills and multicultural competence, understanding for the opinions of dissimilar others, and lower levels of prejudice (Kitsantas, 2004; Lindsey, 2005). As the above examples illustrate, oftentimes macro-level forces interact with more proximal-level forces to influence one’s attitudes and behaviors.
Friends vs. Champions of LGBT Inclusion

Analysis of the data also revealed employees created more inclusive work environments for sexual minorities in two ways. First, employees acted as friendly supporters by providing a safe space for sexual minorities at work. Within these supportive spaces, 10 participants felt their sexual identity was respected and affirmed by others in the workplace. These coworkers provided needed social support that alleviated various stressors associated with minority stress (Meyer, 2003). As Blakely explains:

> My coworkers are great. They are completely accepting. They make me feel okay to be me … Meredith (Blakely’s coworker) really helped me when I came out to my parents … After they basically disowned me, Meredith just said I was now part of her family.

In many respects, this form of support is similar to Herscovitch and Meyer’s (2002) cooperation behavior, in that the employees made modest sacrifices to support inclusion initiatives. Though these efforts were beneficial in terms of social support and identity affirmation, they did not encourage others to create or advocate for formal organizational policies related to LGBT inclusiveness. However, some employees did act as change agents by engaging in champion behaviors that persuaded others to express inclusive beliefs.

The participants considered championing behaviors to be imperative in creating more inclusive work environments for LGBT employees. In fact, 12 of the 13 employees interviewed stressed the importance of having allies in the workplace. Rachel, who works in women’s athletics, discussed how she felt the sport context was particularly heterosexist and desperately needed heterosexual employees to support LGBT inclusiveness. In her words:

> Things are starting to improve, but for the most part, it’s just okay to discriminate against gays and lesbians in sport. … Lesbian coaches get fired, and the news runs the story, but in the end, the coach never gets her job back. … We need people to make policies that won’t allow the athletic department to fire the coach for being gay. … I can’t do it, heck I might get fired. We need more straight coaches to advocate for antidiscrimination policies.

In many cases, the participants described instances in which they wanted to speak out when coworkers or supervisors used noninclusive language or made disparaging comments regarding gays and lesbians, but they felt their minority status inhibited them from voicing their grievances. Fortunately, their ally coworkers were oftentimes willing to take a stand for LGBT inclusiveness and set an example for what type of behavior was acceptable in the workplace.

Power and Status

Before the beginning of the investigation, we expected that employees who held attitudinal support for LGBT inclusion would also behave in ways that championed inclusive policies in the workplace (i.e., behavioral support for inclusion). However, analysis of the data suggests supportive attitudes did not always relate to championing behaviors (see Figure 1). Instead, various factors seemed to influence whether a person displayed inclusive behaviors (e.g., speaking out against homophobic or heterosexist comments). Specifically, the participants consistently discussed how power and status can significantly influence employee support for inclusion. On a number of occasions participants explained how those who held power in the athletic department were in a better position to advocate for LGBT equality. As one illustrative example, Randi described how working in men’s sports might afford one more power:

> A male coach, especially one who is married with three kids, can publically support gay and lesbian issues. People will listen; they might even applaud him for his courage to speak out on a controversial topic. Can a female coach do that? Hell no. She’s immediately called a lesbian and all the coaches in her conference are making sure recruits, and their parents, know she’s lesbian and supports lesbianism on the team.

Randi’s comments highlight a number of issues. First, sexuality was seen as a source of power, a theme that other scholars have observed in sport (Sartore & Cunningham, 2010a). Ten of the participants emphasized that it is easier for heterosexual sport employees to advocate for LGBT inclusion than it is for sexual minorities. Four of the participants felt they might lose their job if they advocated for LGBT rights, while others feared they would face social isolation for doing so. As Jimmy explained, “Nobody likes the guy who’s rocking the boat. Just mind your own business and do what you got to do to help the team.” Second, according to the female coaches in the study, heterosexist sport environments negatively affect all women. In fact, all of the coaches noted that it was not enough for women to be heterosexual; they (especially high profile coaches) have to undeniably prove their heterosexuality to promote inclusion. Failure to do so could leave them susceptible to the lesbian label and the victims of negative recruiting tactics.

One’s racial identity can also impact a sport employee’s status in an athletic department. … Mia, for instance, expressed how she would have never participated in the study had she not known and trusted the first author. Similarly, Jimmy said he would not have agreed to be interviewed had he not know Mia and the first author. When asked why she was reluctant to participate, Mia explained:

> Black women are always under the microscope. Um, you have to always keep your guard up. You can’t always trust people … I think in athletics it’s different for us (Black woman). You are trying to earn respect; it’s not going to be given to you … You need to work hard, keep your head down. I wouldn’t suggest being controversial, or what some people believe to be controversial.
Mia’s response suggests sport employees who hold multiple marginalized identities (i.e., Black women) oftentimes are not afforded the same power or status as others; consequently, they may distance themselves from controversial issues in an effort to avoid negative appraisals from others in the athletic department. Thus, as these examples illustrate, to fully understand why employees do or do not support LGBT inclusion, it is important to recognize how having various marginalized identities (e.g., woman, racial minority) may impact their decision to become allies.

Finally, while some findings presented above might appear in any organization, there is evidence to suggest the organizational structure of many athletic departments may create a unique working experience for sexual minorities and allies alike. After analyzing interview transcripts, personal observations, field notes, and departmental emails, the authors determined that the athletic department’s organizational structure closely resembles the Simple Structure (Mintzberg, 1984)—an organization structure that is prevalent among NCAA Division I athletic programs (Cunningham & Rivera, 2001). Moderate levels of formalization and a more centralized decision-making structure characterize the simple structure (Donaldson & Warner, 1974), such that these organizations tend to be more bureaucratic and rely on top-level administrators to make important decisions. Furthermore, research suggests centralized authority structures limit employee empowerment and inversely relate to both perceived procedural justice and perceived interactional justice (Schminke, Ambrose, & Croupanzano, 2000). In contrast, most corporate organizations now offer faster promotions for young professionals, deemphasize bureaucracy, provide opportunities for more responsibility, give employees a voice in the organization, and create flexible work schedules (Kwoh, 2012).

The aforementioned literature suggests sexual minorities and allies may encounter a number of distinctly different work experiences in sport than they will in other work environments. For instance, it is unlikely that top administrators will be concerned with LGBT issues given they are typically Protestant, White, heterosexual, males (Fink, Pastore, & Riemer 2001)—a group that is not know for their support of LGBT-inclusion initiatives (see Herek, 2009). Second, it may be difficult for LGBT sport employees and allies to challenge heterosexist practices if they do not hold a position of power. Perhaps one reason Josh’s department was most successful at creating an inclusive environment is because the compliance department works for both the president’s office and the athletic departments. Having leadership outside the athletic department may have influence their perspectives related to diversity and given them the autonomy to establish their own culture.

**Conclusion**

Champions can play a key role in creating more welcoming and accepting work environments for sexual minorities in sport. Based on the perceptions of the participants, findings in this study illustrate that various macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors influenced the level of employee support for LGBT inclusive policies within the athletic department. Furthermore, power significantly influenced these dynamics, such that individuals in low status positions within the athletic department were hesitant to vocally support LGBT equality. However, those who did champion LGBT inclusive initiatives successfully modeled supportive behaviors and positive attitudes toward LGBT individuals, vocally opposed discriminatory treatment, and provided sexual minorities with a safe space within the heterosexist college sport environment.

Thus, while there are potential limitations (e.g., the participants worked in a conservative department in a conservative part of the U.S., there were few men in the sample, and only two racial minorities), this study provides important theoretical contributions to the literature and practical implications for sport managers. With respect to the former, perhaps the most significant is that it is the first to examine employee support for LGBT inclusion within the sport domain. This examination offers needed insights for understanding why and how sport employees challenge heterosexist environments in sport. Furthermore, past theoretical and empirical investigations have primarily focused on organizational forms of support, and the outcomes associated with such initiatives. This study differs from this focus by adopting a multilevel perspective to understand the various factors that influence employee support. Examining the impact of employee support is particularly useful in the college athletics because unlike corporations, athletic departments reside within the university. As such, they may not have the ability to offer the same LGBT-inclusive polices (e.g., domestic partner benefits) that public corporations do.

In addition, the findings further the intersectionality literature by revealing how having multiple marginalized identities may limit one’s willingness to become a visible champion for inclusion. For instance, Mia suggested supporting LGBT inclusion might negatively affect how one is viewed in the athletic department—particularly if the sport employee is a Black woman. In some ways, her perceptions highlight how challenging that status quo in regards to diversity can be especially difficult in the sport industry. Based on the participants’ interviews, for instance, the culture of sport—where traditional notions of masculinity and heterosexuality persist (Sartore & Cunningham, 2010; Fink et al., 2012; Krane, 2001)—seemed to influence the culture of the diversity within the athletic department and also impact the perceived status of women and racial minorities. Sport scholars need to recognize how the interconnectedness of these forces inhibits change in the sport industry and continue to explore ways to challenge traditional norms.

The findings in this case also offer a number of practical suggestions. First, managers should recognize that the attitudes and behaviors of their employees have a significant impact on workplace inclusion. As such, steps should be taken to ensure employees, who want to become champions for LGBT inclusion, have the necessary education, training, and skills to become effective...
ally in the workplace. Second, the findings reveal that employees, who may be hesitant to display explicit forms of support, may use more discrete behaviors to enhance feelings of acceptance among LGBT sport employees. Finally, top administrators should evaluate the organizational structure of the athletic department to ensure it affords employees the power and autonomy to promote inclusive practices and policies in their respective departments.

Future research should examine why employees choose to champion LGBT-inclusive initiatives. Specifically, research needs to examine what motivates individuals to be supportive of LGBT inclusion, what types of contexts encourage support, and what organizational outcomes are enhanced when support is provided. In addition, more research should focus on issues of power and how one’s status or position in a sport organization influences their behaviors. Finally, future investigations should also examine the ways in which multiple identities interact and influence one’s level of support for LGBT inclusion. Given the intriguing findings of the current study and the need to better understand ways to facilitate pro-LGBT attitudes, more work in this area is needed.

References


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### Appendix

#### Table 1 Participant Information

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<td>Committed</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>Most coworkers</td>
<td>Family &amp; Friends</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jimmy</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Support Staff</td>
<td>Only 1 coworker</td>
<td>Some Friends</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanya</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Support Staff</td>
<td>A few coworkers</td>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blakely</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Committed</td>
<td>Support Staff</td>
<td>Most coworkers</td>
<td>Family &amp; Friends</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mia</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Support Staff</td>
<td>2 coworkers</td>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>Black</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Committed</td>
<td>Support Staff</td>
<td>A few coworkers</td>
<td>Family &amp; Friends</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Committed</td>
<td>Assistant Coach</td>
<td>A few coworkers</td>
<td>Family &amp; Friends</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Assistant Coach</td>
<td>A few coworkers</td>
<td>Family &amp; Friends</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Committed</td>
<td>Mid-level Employee</td>
<td>Most coworkers</td>
<td>Family &amp; Friends</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shannon</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Committed</td>
<td>Mid-level Employee</td>
<td>A few coworkers</td>
<td>Family &amp; Friends</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Committed</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>Most coworkers</td>
<td>Family &amp; Friends</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Randi</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Committed</td>
<td>Head Coach</td>
<td>2 coworkers</td>
<td>Some Family &amp; Friends</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Committed</td>
<td>Assistant Coach</td>
<td>A few coworkers</td>
<td>Family &amp; Friends</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
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