

The Openly Gay Student-Athlete:
Examining Experience and Peer Culture Interaction

Michael R. Bryant

A dissertation
submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

2015

Reading Committee:

Clayton Cook, Chair

Jennifer Hoffman

Nicole Melton

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

College of Education

©Copyright 2015
Michael R. Bryant

University of Washington

ABSTRACT

The Openly Gay Student-Athlete:
Examining Experience and Peer Culture Interaction

Michael R. Bryant

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Clayton Cook
College of Education

As there has been an increased focus upon improving sport spaces towards becoming more inclusive of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals, American sport culture, although improving, continues to contest homophobic attitudes towards LGB participants. This investigation seeks to capitalize upon that improvement momentum with focus upon specific variables that comprise sport spaces for male athletes and how, in combination with the cultural norms of sport, they may influence their experience as an openly gay athlete. As recent literature has identified an improving shift within the culture of sport for males, sport participation for boys and men continues to be influenced by traditional norms of hegemonic masculinity and homophobia. As the landscape of sport continues to

welcome more openly gay male athletes, particularly from the high school and college ranks, ongoing empirical research is needed to continue examining and discussing their experiences and the influence offered through evolving and improving culture of sport. Additional literature exploring factors and variables most influential towards the gay male athlete experience and upon their identity development will be helpful in sustaining a dialogue that is relevant and current to the issues gay male athletes may face. Therefore, this inquiry seeks to examine experience of current openly gay male intercollegiate student-athletes by exploring the impact of their surrounding on-campus peer culture systems.

This qualitative study examined six participants who all identified as an openly gay student-athlete and either currently participate or recently graduated from their intercollegiate athletics experience. Most participants were identified via online resources through which each had provided a personal account as a gay college male student-athlete, as well as contact information for further inquiry. Additional participants were identified through a snowballing approach. A semi-structured interview process was utilized as opportunity for participants to share their experiences as influenced by their on-campus peer culture. A conceptual framework was developed utilizing Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model, primarily focusing upon the microsystem and mesosystem of which incorporate peer-culture components most proximal to the individual. Findings discussed include participant and institution profiles, individual coming experiences, interactions with teammates and coaches, advocacy efforts and interests, as well as participant-identified attributes needed to foster a positive experience.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES.....	v
LIST OF TABLES.....	vi
DEDICATION.....	vii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.....	viii
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of the Issue.....	2
Gender & Norms.....	3
Organizational Efforts.....	4
Context & Interaction.....	6
Purpose of the Study.....	8
Research Questions.....	9
Research Design.....	10
Significance of the Issue.....	10
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	14
Homophobic Bullying in Sport.....	14
Culture of Sport for Males.....	16
Homophobia & Heterosexism.....	18
Peer Culture Structure & Impact.....	19
Student-Athlete Profile.....	22
Coming Out.....	23
Theoretical & Conceptual Framework.....	25
Identity Development.....	25
Sexual Identity Development.....	27
Research Questions.....	29
Conceptual Framework.....	31
Ecological Systems Model.....	32
Synthesizing the Theory.....	34
CHAPTER III: METHOD & DATA ANALYSIS.....	37
Setting & Participants.....	38
Gaining Access.....	39
Data Collection Procedures.....	41
Semi-Structured Interviews.....	41
Data Analysis.....	43
Trustworthiness.....	44
CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS & DISCUSSION.....	47
The Individual and Their Campus.....	48

Participant Profiles.....	48
Choosing a School.....	51
Individual Identity.....	54
Coming Out on Campus.....	56
Interactions with Campus Personnel.....	69
Online Story Reactions.....	74
In-Team Experience.....	77
Living Arrangements.....	81
Advocacy Interests and Efforts.....	85
Individuals Attributes for Positive Experience.....	89
Summary of Findings.....	94
 CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION.....	 100
Limitations.....	103
Future Directions.....	104
Conclusion.....	107
 RESOURCES.....	 109
 APPENDICES.....	 117
A – Participant Recruitment Invitation.....	117
B – Interview Protocol.....	119

LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figure Number</u>	<u>Page</u>
1. Bronfenbrenner's (1993) Ecological Systems Model	34
2. Conceptualized Process of Peer Culture Influence	35

LIST OF TABLES

<u>Table Number</u>	<u>Page</u>
1. Participants	38
2. Participant & Campus Profiles	50
3. Summary of Major Themes	94

DEDICATION

To my mom and dad, my sisters Karen and Trisha, my partner Chris, and my late friend Joe. Thank you for your endless encouragement and support. To my nieces, Lindsay and Matisse, the sky is the limit. Pursue your passions and be you in every way every single day.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The biggest thank you of all goes to the following: My family, mom, dad, Karen, and Trisha, it has been a long road and it was your encouragement and support since the beginning that has helped me achieve this goal of mine. My partner Chris, your friendship and love mean the world to me. Know that I would not have achieved this without you next to me every step of the way. And, to my dear, late friend Joe, I have held you close to my heart since the day we met. You remain one of the most important and profound influences in my life with your friendship and your encouragement to push through school, be myself, and pursue the things I am most passionate about. I am very lucky to have known you. I appreciate and miss you every day.

I offer many thanks to all of the folks along the way that have provided me with their incredible guidance and expertise. To my advisor and committee chair, Clay Cook, thank you for your support and for being the one to see this through. To my committee members, Sara Lopez, Jennifer Hoffman, and Nicole Melton all who are strong, driven, intelligent, and passionate women, much like the women in my family. Thank you for your inspiration, leadership and collaboration.

Tons of thanks are due to my extended family and friends, as well as all of the educators, professionals and mentors I have met throughout my life. You all have taught me something that has influenced my commitment to lifelong learning and being better with every day.

Lastly, thank you to the participants in this study and everyone else around the world living their lives truthfully and authentically. You are original. You are

inspiring. You are the difference. And to those seeking or longing to live and share their truth, it can happen. It will happen. Be visible and vocal. Connect to the many support services and networks that are in place to help. They are waiting for the opportunity to meet you and support your journey. Live your true self. Share your life. Celebrate you.

** Everyone has a story that deserves to be heard. **

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“As he shared with them his story of isolation, there wasn’t a dry eye in the room. While it had been easy for some of the young men to tease someone they thought was gay – and someone who denied it – the impact of their actions hit home when Gordon revealed the speculation was true, and that the teasing nearly drove him from the team.” (Ziegler, 2014)

This statement, written for Outsports.com, the leading online blog for gay-themed sport media and news, shares an excerpt from Derrick Gordon’s experience coming out to his teammates. Gordon became the first openly gay NCAA (National Collegiate Athletics Association) Division I men’s basketball player at this moment, when he came out as a gay man and disclosed to his teammates and coaches at the University of Massachusetts that he had been silent about his gay identity up until that point. This is the same part of his identity that teammates had speculated about in Gordon and one towards which they taunted and teased him about following their recognition of Gordon in an online photograph showing him and his then boyfriend together outside a popular northeast gay establishment.

As the in-team and locker room fodder and banter often jokingly attacking one’s masculinity and physical prowess is considered commonplace in male sport culture, this experience was very personal and upsetting for Gordon as he, like many young men dealing with sexual identity development issues, struggled with finding the confidence and right opportunity to tell his peers a very deep secret about himself, confirming to them that their taunting was actually directed at something very real in Gordon’s life.

However, it is in the emotional response from his teammates in which they share their regret and remorse for their actions leading to their pledge of support for Derrick moving forward.

Statement of the Issue

Derrick Gordon's experience is the type of experience that the sport community continues to learn more about as a growing number of male student-athletes are choosing to share their personal stories of struggle and triumph as an openly gay individual participating in varsity sport activities as part of their college experience. In recent years, in general, the culture of sport in the United States has seen a positive shift when considering homophobia and heterosexism towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) athletes (Anderson, 2012; Cunningham, 2012; Griffin, 2012). Examples of this cultural improvement are not only evident in the growth of these personal accounts being shared through popular media outlets, but also in both research and practice with the increase of available empirical literature and the emergence of organizations dedicated to addressing and improving these issues in sport. This steady influx of gay male athlete representation, particularly at the college level, has been encouraged, supported and chronicled by non-profit organizations such as Athlete Ally and GO! Athletes, both of which have a growing contingency of intercollegiate-level openly gay, lesbian, transgender and ally members. The purpose of this inquiry is to examine and discuss factors contributing to this positive trend and increase in public identity disclosure among gay college male student-athletes, with a particular focus upon the on-campus peer culture system and its influence upon positive or negative individual experience.

As there has been growth in attention and awareness surrounding issues involving LGBT athletes, gay males in particular, empirical literature is limited when it comes to factors that comprise the on-campus environment for student-athletes. Thus, it is the opinion of this researcher that any gap that may exist warrants greater attention upon the variables that comprise the college campus context in order to further advance the current foundation of literature regarding American sport culture beyond the basic discussion of improving attitudes towards LGBT identity towards one that identifies and highlights components and interactions that directly impact individual experience. Furthermore, this inquiry presents an opportunity to further bridge research and practice regarding these issues, as it befits these young organizations focused on improving sport culture for LGBT athletes to accompany their advocacy work with empirical inquiry in order to further inform their programming and subsequently measure the impact of their efforts.

Gender & Norms

Moving forward, it is important to understand my position as the researcher regarding the examination of only the male gender. First, existing literature discusses the vast differences between males and females and the culture, stigma, and stereotypes associated with sport participation (Griffin, 2012). For example, traditional masculine norms associated with sport contradict traditional feminine qualities of which has generated a distinct body of literature designated to female athletes, sexual identity and sport participation. These same masculine norms represent a distinct discussion when referring to males, as expressed in the forthcoming discussion. Regarding transgender athletes, literature examining policy and experiences continues to emerge and also incorporates separate discussion concerning these individuals. Second, issues regarding

male athletes and sexuality have been far less examined in comparison to literature focused on females (Anderson, 2012). Thus, this current inquiry has the potential to contribute to and expand the scope of this literature focus. Finally, in consideration of literature involving peer culture constructs and impact, it is discussed that boys choose to interact in peer groups that emphasize competition more often than girls (Bierman, 2004). Additionally, negative interactions within peer groups (i.e. aggression, bullying) are more prevalent among males (Bierman, 2004). It is for these reasons that males are the focus of this discussion as it relates to the college-level experience.

Organizational Efforts

Regarding sport organizations at all levels, issues involving male athletes and sexual identity are a current topic that has captivated the American sports culture in recent years and there is evidence of a positive trend in their commitments to make their activities and environments more inclusive. Constituents of professional organizations such as the National Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball (MLB), and National Hockey League (NHL) continue to publicly address their respective organization's increased attention towards inclusion, standards, and policies. One example includes NFL members actively linked to organizations such as Athlete Ally of which focuses on improving sport spaces for gay athletes through foundations of respect and inclusion, and by empowering straight allies to voice their support. At the college level, athletic departments are engaging in advocacy work connected to the efforts of such organizations as the You Can Play Project. One example of this is evidenced by collection of online "You Can Play" videos, which typically profiles an institution's

athletic personnel of coaches, athletes and administrators and verbalizing their commitment to inclusion within their department.

The term “ally” has become symbolic of the national effort to improve sport culture for LGBT individuals as emphasized through the efforts of organizations such as Athlete Ally and the You Can Play Project, both of which promote and encourage straight ally support. In exploring the context of the college campus environment, it was important and necessary for this empirical inquiry to address the role of the ally in reference to the support provided by individuals that comprise the surrounding peer culture system of the gay college male student-athlete. A portion of Athlete Ally’s online profile states (Athlete Ally, N.D.):

An Athlete Ally can be any person...who takes a stand against homophobia and transphobia in sports and brings the message of respect, inclusion and equality to their athletic community... No matter how you identify, being an ally means honoring the unique experiences of LGBT individuals and championing respect in your own way.

Part of Athlete Ally’s organizational charge incorporates empowering campus ambassadors, a role typically filled by a current student-athlete delegated to spreading the Athlete Ally message and mission throughout their respective athletic department. It is from consideration of this on-campus ally behavior and development, as well as through the above definition of ally, that student-athlete peers within the campus peer culture system are explored as part of this discussion.

Context & Interaction

As the focus of this research is upon athletes participating in sport as part of college academic settings, it is important to further investigate the profile of the student-athlete in order to better understand their place and role within a campus environment. Additionally, it is critical to explore their position to further understand the challenges they may endure as influenced by micro-level factors considering their own sexual identity development exploration. The micro-level peer culture system is the primary focus of this discussion, specifically pertaining to interpersonal interactions as influential towards individual identity development, experience and outcomes.

Sport participation has long been a significant source of peer interaction and acceptance among boys, which is often carried with them throughout their lifetime as a continued purpose for interaction and outlet for acceptance and inclusion. As sport traditions and participation for males are rooted in hegemony when considering masculinity and traits of competitiveness, aggression, and violence, it is within this context that non-conforming sexual identity is often subjected to great challenges and ridicule. Furthermore, homophobia in sport has a prevalence that, although more visibly contested today, still exists among and towards male sport participants. Even though the dialogue continues to grow and there are more efforts to create inclusive sport environments, the unfortunate reality is that negative experiences and viewpoints remain rampant as seen in popular media. Across the country, gay male athletes continue to be harassed, often ridiculed with negative comments and actions grounded in themes representative of masculine hegemony as it intersects with traditional norms of male sport participation. However, sport culture has finally reached a very capable level when

considering the ability to endure and combat this negative behavior. This is due to the increased organizational efforts to make sport more inclusive, the increased standard in ally leadership and behavior in support of LGBT athletes, and the increasing visibility of openly LGBT individuals in sport.

One of the most visible recent stories of coming out and triumph involving a college male athlete is that of Michael Sam, now a former NCAA Division I football star at the University of Missouri. He later became the first openly gay male athlete drafted in the National Football League. Sam's journey from the college ranks to the professional level was heavily chronicled by multiple media sources, with a range of speculation as to where he would be drafted into the league, and even if he would be selected. Much of the media dialogue also presented a great challenge for some in being able to separate his openly gay sexual orientation from his athletic talents. For purposes of this research, it is in Sam's story while in college that is the most compelling. In an interview with 'Outside the Lines' (Connelly, 2014), Sam discussed coming out to his teammates, the fear that he felt, and their reactions. He stated, "I told my teammates this past August, I came out to my teammates, and they took it great. They rallied around me. They supported me. I couldn't ask for better teammates."

Sam told his teammates in August, just prior to the start of his final year in college and as a member of the Missouri football team. Although his sexual orientation was not known much beyond the confines of his teammates and coaches, Sam indicated that by telling his teammates "it was a big load off my chest". (ESPN, 2014). As a result, Sam went on to have one of the most successful seasons of his career being named the 'Defensive Player of the Year' for the Southeastern conference, highly regarded as the

most prolific college football conference in the country. His on-field success also landed him on the All-America list. As for his team, they also had one of their most successful seasons as they competed in one of the most coveted bowl games of the year and finished among the top teams in the country by season's end.

The football culture at the University of Missouri welcomed Michael Sam and his announcement as a gay man. They provided him the support needed for him to engage and compete in his sport at the highest level. As a result, the outcomes were extremely positive for everyone involved.

Purpose of the Study

While empirically based literature continues to conclude that sport culture is improving for gay athletes (Anderson, 2011), I contest that a more explicit focus upon environmental factors and context is needed in order to better understand individual experience and factors that contribute to that experience being positive or negative. Furthermore, in exploring these types of variables, this may lead to informing opportunities for education and intervention involving LGBT athlete participation and ally behavior.

Student-athletes are one subset population of sport culture within which opportunity is available to explore specific variables within a specific context. Student-athletes participate within very structured and regulated environments when considering intercollegiate athletics departments and overall campus infrastructure. The student-athlete experience is therefore influenced by the peer-culture system surrounding them when considering the bevy of specific roles such as teammates, coaches, professors, and athletic and academic administrators influencing their participation, decision-making and

development. As well, student-athletes have components in place such as their role on a specific athletic team and/or scholarship money of which represent stakes which may be compromised or put in jeopardy for non-conforming or non-compliant individuals. Furthermore, the college years and experience can be considered formidable towards individual's personal growth and development given the contexts of environment, maturation, increased freedoms and responsibilities, as well as exposure to personalities, opinions and ideas that may differ from and challenge their own.

This empirical investigation contends that literature exploring gay athlete identity and experience can purposefully grow by explicitly exploring variables and contexts most closely positioned to individuals and their development and experience. As is essential to the analysis and discussion of the collected data, this study recognizes the central role of actual experiences as well as participant perception of their surrounding peer-culture system. Therefore, it is within these experiences and perceptions, and thus the purpose of this study, that peer culture factors are identified and discussed of which are most influential towards outcomes being positive or negative among the participants.

Research Questions

The qualitative approach to this research study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) How do gay male intercollegiate student-athletes navigate their sexual identity development while in college?
- 2) What micro-level variables of the college male student-athlete peer culture promote or inhibit sexual identity development experiences and outcomes for gay or questioning individuals?

3) How do both athletic- and academic-specific factors compare in their support of the gay college male student-athlete development and experience?

By investigating these questions, this will contribute specifically to creating a broader foundation of empirical inquiry involving gay males participating in intercollegiate-level athletics. The goal is to create a greater understanding of sport participation at this level and the key variables that directly influence individual experience, as well as identify opportunities for college personnel to continue growing the effort to create more inclusive athletics participation opportunities.

Research Design

In order to document the experiences of gay college male student-athletes, a qualitative approach was utilized. Participants were identified via online media outlets of which profiled the individual as an out college athlete and included email addresses for the individual for further inquiry. Individuals were interviewed through a semi-structured interview process, with open-ended questions guiding the conversation. This study is framed by student development theory, with an emphasis on ecological and peer culture systems, and with an assumption that micro-level environmental factors directly contribute to positive and negative individual experiences.

Significance of the Issue

In drawing upon a synthesis of literature, it is imperative to further discuss the significance of the issue and investigation involving student-athlete peer culture and male sexual identity development in order to connect the variables to create a compelling case. Previously, it was stated that although the topic is popular and relevant to the current shifting culture of sport for males, the literature is lacking depth regarding the

investigation of male athletes and the explicitness of issues and experiences associated with sexual identity development as influenced by the peer culture system. However, it is also necessary to mention the shifting sports culture from a social justice perspective. The battle for more inclusive sport spaces for LGBT individuals compares to previous movements of which forever changed the landscape for sport. The desegregation of sport in the early 1940's and 50's, followed by the Title IX legislation in the 1970's, both led to greater measures and practice of equality when considering the advancement of marginalized groups in the context of athletics participation. By no means are those issues obsolete today. However, significant initial gains have provided the foundation and platform for the fight for equality to continue.

Several additional key points should be understood when considering the significance of the issue of examining sport and sexual identity issues among males. First, homophobia in sport promotes violence in many forms (Messner, 1992). In addressing the peer culture system, this may help to curb violence towards gay male athletes and those perceived to be gay, as well as help to eliminate the derogatory gay slurs associated with this aggression. Second, when comparing male and female attitudes towards gay and lesbian individuals, males more consistently reported more negative attitudes. However, among student-athletes, it was reported that for those that had contact with gay and lesbian individuals, attitudes were increasingly positive (Roper & Halloran, 2007). This focus upon student-athlete peer culture may contribute to education and interventions that will help further evolve the attitudes of the college-level student-athlete population and peer culture, viewed by some experts as key catalysts for changing the culture of sport (McLellan, King, & Rockey, 2012).

Eric Anderson (2009), an academic leader in regards to the examination of sport culture and experience for gay males, presented his concept of “inclusive” masculinities, which refers to what he considers as a softer masculinity among today’s college-aged males. He claims that inclusive masculinities incorporate decreased sexism and bullying. He also concluded that the presence of inclusive masculinities may lead to greater team bonding and cohesiveness. Analysis and discussion within this current investigation have the potential to lead to further inquiry into Anderson’s concept of inclusive masculinities, its existence as paralleled to hegemonic masculinity, and its relevance in helping to create more inclusive sport climate.

Furthermore, from a sport organization perspective, Cunningham (2011) concluded that by coupling sexual orientation diversity with an inclusive diversity strategy, results included greater performance and outcomes. Among athletic teams, this would allow for individuals to focus more on attaining team goals and less on the potential consequences of coming out. It is the opinion of this researcher that if immediate sport environments promoted more inclusive attitudes and opportunities through the presence of ally leadership and supportive peer culture, this would help to curb any anxiety or stress for gay individuals associated with their sexual identity, thus allowing them the opportunity to focus more freely upon their role as a contributor to their team’s performance and success. As well, for males questioning their sexuality, the outward promotion of inclusive space will indicate their environment would be supportive if they are to arrive at a decision to come out openly and disclose their sexual identity as gay.

Continued empirical investigation into these issues has the potential to help advance knowledge and increase the literature base. Additionally, consistent research inquiry will also allow for the literature to remain current and on par with these issues as they seemingly are advancing rather quickly with the growing visibility of openly gay athletes and the increased attention and awareness upon issues involving this population.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the United States, the culture of sport has seen homophobic attitudes decrease in recent years. Additionally, there is a growing focus on improving sport spaces in order to be more inclusive of LGBT individuals. However, as recent large-scale quantitative studies (Campus Pride, 2012; GLSEN, 2013) have indicated, LGBT participants in school-based sport-related activities continue to experience harassment, bullying and discrimination stemming from poor leadership and/or negative peer interactions.

Homophobic Bullying in Sport

Sports within academic settings provide a unique and complex context for examining student-athlete sexual identity development and experience. Two recent studies have provided data and insight regarding peer harassment within the context of sport activity settings. Both studies examined sport within the context of academic environments and shared a focus on the experiences for LGBT participants. In their 2013 report examining middle and high school athletics and physical education experiences, the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN, 2013) discussed that although sport and physical activity at school provides great benefits and outcomes, some LGBT individuals avoid participating due to the bullying and harassment that exists within these contexts (GLSEN, 2013). Regarding participation on sports teams specifically, over 23% of LGBT students participated in interscholastic sports activities, as over 6% of those individuals indicating they held a role as captain of their team. Furthermore, GLSEN also reported that among LGBT student-athletes, these individuals reported better academic and mental health outcomes.

In spite of these benefits, participation among sports teams did not always occur without elements of exclusion and/or some form of verbal or physical harassment. Nearly 28% of LGBT student-athletes reported being bullied while playing on a school sports teams because of their sexual identity. More alarming, some LGBT students reported being completely denied of the opportunity of scholastic sports participation due to attitudes and perceptions that having a gay person would cause disruption or because it was expressed that other members of the team did not want a gay person to participate among them. For some adolescents, middle school may provide the initial exposure or be the entry point to athletics and physical activity. For those that experience harassment and discrimination, this may deter their continued participation as they get older, thus potentially lowering the overall volume of LGBT athletes, a sum that, assumingly, as it increases so too does the respect and inclusion of all LGBT athletes in sport.

The Campus Pride LGBTQ National College Athlete Report (2012) focused on athletics climate at the intercollegiate level. The study's discussion identifies "climate" as the learning, living and working environments for individuals on college campuses. The general results of this study indicate that climate matters when considering LGBQ student-athletes and their experiences and outcomes. LGBQ student-athletes reported more negative climate experiences as compared to their heterosexual peers. Regarding harassment, LGBQ individuals reported twice as much harassment occurred compared to heterosexual student-athletes, as 39% of LGBQ student-athletes reported harassment occurred based on their sexual identity.

Alarmingly, it was reported that 64% of all harassment occurred while at practice. Practice time and space represents a majority of the sport context within which student-

athletes engage with the same peer group over and over. While in season, athletes and their teammates participate in practice activities almost on a daily basis and for multiple hours at a time. Regarding peer group constructs, as discussed ahead, there is great potential for individuals to develop peer acceptance and friendships through shared activities such as participating in sports. This current statistic regarding harassment during practice counters that notion with the idea that shared activity spaces can also house great amounts of hostility among those working towards common goals and outcomes. Furthermore, this statistic could very likely a reason why gay males, or those exploring their sexual identity as gay, often remain silent about this piece of their personal identity.

Culture of Sport for Males

Sociologists have broadly defined sport as a defining element of a young male's masculinity (Anderson, 2002; Messner, 1992; Pronger, 1990). Additionally, researchers have concluded the institute of sport innately includes an element of homophobia (Coakley, 1998; Messner, 1992; Pronger, 1990), largely in response to certain sports being aggressive and masculine in nature (Messner, 1992). Sports such as football, hockey, basketball, and wrestling require participants to engage in aggressive physical contact, and competing athletes often must possess a certain physical prowess in order to be successful. This trait of power equates to attributes of accepted masculinity, therefore positioning sport participation as a source of approval for males within society.

When also considering the nature of social constructions, the social structures and interactions that develop and occur within sports settings among athletes, for instance, also tend to reinforce behavioral and identity norms such as masculinity and homophobia

among males and their peers (Harris, 2010). Aggressive team sports environments often require individuals to subscribe to physical actions and verbal cues associated with hegemonic masculinity ideals.

Specific to the athlete peer culture, Messner (1992) identifies sport as a social institution that “remains the single most important element of the peer-status system of U.S. adolescent males”. According to Ehrmann, Ehrmann, & Jordan (2011), a boy’s value and worth is contingent upon his athletic ability. He claims that American culture attributes strength, skills, and the ability to compete to masculinity, which thus leads to acceptance. Growing up, boys view sport participation as an avenue in which they can gain peer acceptance, develop a peer network, and learn what it means to be a man. The types of sport in which they participate also lend to enhancing their perceived masculinity (Pronger, 1990), as those that participate in football or hockey versus those that participate in more artistic type sports such as gymnastics or figure skating, are traditionally deemed more masculine.

As boys advance through adolescence, some develop the interest and athletic prowess to compete at the college level. It is the opinion of the researcher that for these individuals, accompanying their advanced athletic skill set with compliance towards team and sport norms may help increase their opportunities to compete at a higher level. Compliance with norms may decrease the opportunity for distractions, therefore helping athletes maintain focus on generating success on the field, in the classroom, and in accordance with all factors associated with being a college-level student-athlete as previously outlined.

Homophobia and Heterosexism

As it is evident that the social norms of sport are rooted in hegemonic masculinity (Anderson, 2005; Messner, 1992), the homophobia associated with that may limit opportunity for male athletes to safely explore and develop their sexual identity if differing from the masculine heterosexual expectation. Kimmel (2008, p. 128) suggests, “Guys like sports because it is the easiest way to choose “guy” over “gay” – and make sure everyone gets the right idea about them.” Student development experts discuss the potential impact the college experience can offer an individual in regards to personal development (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). For college male student-athletes, opportunities to explore and develop their sexual identity may be hindered by sport and social norms associated with their athletics participation and commitments.

The term homophobia was first used in the 1960’s by psychologist George Weinberg, and in part refers to the irrational fear of LGBT individuals felt by heterosexuals (Cunningham, 2011; Weinberg, 1972). Homophobia may also amount to hostile behaviors towards sexual minorities, which includes acts of discrimination, rejection, and violence. Aggression and violence in teams sports environments and competitions is often also accompanied by language and slurs derogatory of the LGBT community.

Different from homophobia, heterosexism is a macro-level term that is culturally influenced (Cunningham, 2011; Creed, 2006; Herek, 2000). Heterosexist views consider heterosexual relationships as the only acceptable forms of attraction, and include a privilege and bias over any form of behavior or relationship that does not comply. In a sport sense, heterosexist views have long considered that masculine and aggressive team

sports environments do not include any gay participants, nor have they traditionally held positive attitudes towards the idea of a gay male being involved.

Throughout the literature, these concepts are prevalent among discussions involving males and sport participation. As the traditional cultural norms associated with masculinity and sport remain dominant, it is important that investigation into the male athlete peer culture system continues in order to identify strategies that may help create more inclusive sport environments.

Peer Culture Structure & Impact

The micro-level peer culture system is the primary focus of this discussion specifically pertaining to individual influence and impact towards individual identity development and outcomes. Future inquiry will be intentional towards examining the level at which allies are present and compare the affect of ally and non-ally engagement.

George Kuh (1995, p. 564) defines peer culture as “any group with which individual members identify, affiliate, and seek acceptance and approval over a prolonged period” (Kuh, 1995). As this suggested research will focus on sports as part of academic settings, it is in Renn and Arnold’s advancement of Kuh’s concept of peer culture to represent college environments that will be the focus. Renn and Arnold (2003, p. 262) state specifically, “campus peer culture encompasses the forces and processes that shape individual and collective life on campus in terms of identity, group membership, acceptable discourse, and desirable behaviors”. The focus here is towards the personal interactions with others closest to the developing individual, those at the micro-level represented by roles such as teammates, friends, roommates, and/or classmates, among others. These individuals comprise the social structures and interactions within peer

cultures that reinforce behavior and identity norms (Harris, 2010). In consideration of ally influence, it is imperative to investigate their position within these social structures if the traditional homophobic nature of sport is to continue improving moving forward.

When comparing concepts of peer acceptance versus peer rejection, the literature suggests that peers hold the power and control of niches available that foster one result over the other (Bierman, 2004). Individuals that are liked by others typically possess specific skills or traits (i.e. cooperativeness, congeniality, etc.) that are deemed favorable to others. Furthermore, in order for friendships to develop a mutual affection must exist. Literature suggests that friendships most often emerge when there is common ground between two individuals such as within the context of shared activities (Bierman, 2004). Sports represent a specific niche for peer liking to occur as an individuals athletic prowess and performance are examples of skill set variables that may attract admiration and affirmation from another. The context of sport and the sharing in sustained training and competitive experiences among teammates, for example, create opportunity for friendships to emerge. For individuals immersed in sport environments that contain friendships, concerns emerge when considering their sexual identity development and the potential of jeopardizing this peer acceptance due to the homophobic norms associated with sport.

Literature suggests that peer rejection involves individuals being ostracized because of differences and non-conforming behaviors. Furthermore, rejection often can lead to harassment, intimidation, and bullying towards those that are disliked (Bierman, 2004). Team and sport environments can create a unique situation when considering that within interscholastic sport experiences, athletes are typically chosen for their teams

based on their athletic prowess and skill set and the notion that each individual has something to contribute to the success of the team. As this acknowledgement and selection of an individual's athleticism may help to culturally confirm an acceptable form of masculinity, for a non-heterosexual or questioning individual, sexual identity expression may be suppressed in order to maintain this achieved peer acceptance. A recent study (Southall, Nagel, Anderson, Polite, & Southall, 2009) of male college athlete's attitudes towards sexual orientation discussed that 61.5% of male athletes reported they would be accepting of a gay or bisexual teammate. In comparison, among the female respondents, 96.4% reported having accepting attitudes. As over 28% of male respondents indicated they would reject a teammate that was gay, bisexual or even perceived as gay, the more alarming statistic is that nearly 6% of them reported that they would or do harass these individuals. Although sports can provide the context for developing peer acceptance and friendships, these environments also undoubtedly harbor individuals with negative attitudes and intentions to harm teammates that do not subscribe to the cultural norms of sport in spite of their teammate's athletic prowess and ability to contribute to team success.

As the focus of this research will be on athletes participating in sport as part of college academic settings, it is important to further investigate the profile of the student-athlete in order to better understand their place and role within a campus environment. Additionally, it is critical to explore their position to further understand the challenges they may endure as influenced by micro-level factors considering their own sexual identity development exploration.

Student-Athlete Profile

Student-athletes represent a specific subset of student populations on college campuses everywhere. Life as a student-athlete can be very complex and propose many unique challenges, as individuals must learn to balance both academic and athletic roles in order to achieve successful and positive outcomes (Watt & Moore, 2001). As the duality of academic and athletic responsibilities requires disciplined management on the part of the individual, their assumed role as an ambassador of the institution may also subject them to greater levels of public scrutiny as compared to the average college student. Coaches, academic advisors, team psychologists, teammates, and other designated athletic personnel, representing micro-level factors within the individuals peer culture system, most often provide the on-campus support and services towards role fulfillment, campus engagement and representation, as well as personal development (Carodine, Almond, & Gratto, 2001).

It is important to consider that psychosocial and identity development is influenced, whether for better or worse, by the individual's interactive peer culture that surrounds them (Renn & Arnold, 2003). Although responsibilities relating to their campus role and life may differ from non-athletes (Carodine et al, 2001), the opportunities for personal growth and identity development offered during the collegiate years for student-athletes remain similar. In addition to providing academic resources, college campus constructs also typically offer services and organizations dedicated to providing information and guidance relating to racial, ethnic, cultural, gender and sexual identity. However, as many institutions offer separate and distinct academic-related support services specific to their student-athlete population, the proximity of support and

services related to identity development may, in some environments, be difficult to access by student-athletes as they most often are designed and designated to serve the entire campus student population (Hamilton & Sina, 2001). From this, it may be the situation that the level of on-campus role demands as student and athlete prohibits the individual ample opportunity to access campus-wide services during the time at which they are made available to students, especially if not located within close proximity to athletic-type facilities at which student-athletes spend the majority of their non-classroom time with practice sessions, team meetings, dining, as well as academic and tutor sessions.

Coming Out

As one's sexual orientation is a deep-level personal characteristic and is not easily identifiable (Sartore, 2007; Cunningham, 2011), it is therefore not truly known about the individual unless the individual actually addresses and discloses this part of their identity personally. According to literature, the decision to disclose one's gay sexual identity may be one of the most important decisions a person can make when considering the impact upon interpersonal relationships, sport and work opportunities, as well as potentially subjecting themselves to physical or verbal harm (Cunningham, 2011; Cain, 1991).

Student development literature discusses various models regarding gay identity development and the coming out process (Fassinger, 1998, D'Augelli, 1994; Cass, 1979). Collectively, these models recognize the social invisibility of a concealed gay identity, as well as discuss that identity disclosure is achieved through various stages involving confusion, recognition, acceptance, and synthesis. The social contexts that surround the individual are also accounted for as influential towards identity development and

acceptance.

It is in Cunningham's (2011) discussion of sexual orientation disclosure, utilizing Clair, Beatty, and MacLean's (2005) work that identifies "passing" versus "revealing" strategies, as this process pertains to individuals within the sport context. Passing is identified as "the practice of withholding or failing to reveal a personal identity that is invisible or unrecognizable to others." (Cunningham, p. 225). According to Clair et al (2005), passing occurs when individuals intentionally offer false information about themselves (fabrication), when they actively withhold information pertaining to their sexual orientation (concealment), or they purposely avoid any inquiries regarding their sexual orientation (discretion). Contrary to passing, revealing is described as "the practice of disclosing a personal identity that would otherwise be indistinguishable to others." (Cunningham, p. 225). Individual revealing occurs when one offers hints or clues related to their sexual orientation (signaling), when the individual attempts to include this part of their identity within ordinary or common situations (normalizing), or when one intentionally places greater emphasis upon their differences from others (differentiating).

Cunningham (2011) also outlines contextual conditions and individual differences that contribute to one's decision to either pass or reveal their sexual orientation. Contextual influences may include diversity within the setting or organization climate, norms, and whether legal protections are in place (Cunningham, 2011; Clair et al, 2005). Regarding individual differences, the decision to pass or reveal may be influenced by the level of risk one is willing to assume, the level of monitoring one engages in regarding how they fit in to a given situation, context or environment, self-esteem, or whether one

possesses other personal characteristics that may also create bias among peers or others within a given context (Cunningham, 2011; Clair et al, 2005).

Theoretical & Conceptual Framework

In order to understand the issues being addressed further, multiple theoretical frameworks pertaining to college student identity development will be discussed, with specific emphasis on components that represent micro-level factors often found within the surrounding peer culture. Additionally, a human ecology model will be presented, which represents the relationships between the individual and the most proximate factors within his peer culture system, as well as the affect of those dynamics upon his development. The following discussion will also offer specific research questions representing the intent of future inquiry involving the development and experience of the gay college male student-athlete. It is important to note that there is a gap in the literature in which these theoretical constructs have been applied and discussed regarding the experience and development specific to the college male student-athlete population.

Identity Development

To begin, Chickering's *Theory of Identity Development* was created specifically to examine the development process of students engaged in higher education environments. According to Chickering, establishment of identity is a core developmental process with which students struggle, and once identity is established students are better equipped to resolve other issues (Evans et al, 2010; Chickering, 1969).

Chickering (1969) identified seven vectors, or stages, associated with identity development of which incorporate an individual's feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and relations with others as the person moves towards individuation. He emphasizes that

individuals progress through these varying stages at their own pace, as the stages do not necessarily follow a sequential order. Furthermore, these stages often can interact with one another as the individual evaluates and reevaluates their development. The seven vectors include: 1) Developing competence; 2) Managing emotions; 3) Moving through autonomy toward interdependence; 4) Developing mature interpersonal relationships; 5) Establishing identity; 6) Developing purpose; 7) Developing integrity.

For college male student-athletes, these vectors influence one another as the individual learns to navigate and manage roles and responsibilities according to both academic and athletic pursuits. Throughout the course of a collegiate career, an individual student-athlete may evolve in certain areas that then impact other areas both positively and negatively. For example, the first stage of developing competence, Chickering presents three types of competence as intellectual, physical, and interpersonal (Evans et al, 2010). If an individual is struggling to impress his coach with his physical skill set enough to earn playing time, this may impact his focus or intellectual competence to succeed in the classroom in order to maintain his athletic eligibility. Counter to this idea, if an individual is struggling to achieve required intellectual or academic standards in the classroom in order to be eligible for athletics participation, this undoubtedly affects his opportunities to train and compete, or physical competence, which may also strain his interpersonal competence or relationships with teammate peers and coaches.

Chickering and Reisser (1993) advanced Chickering's original theory to include seven factors, or "key influences", related to the individual's environment that impact identity formation and the development process. Some of these influences include

institutional objectives, institutional size, curriculum, and teaching. Of the seven factors, I suggest a focus on three as related specifically to an individual's immediate peer culture: 1) Student-Faculty relationships; 2) Friendships and student communities; 3) Student development programs and services. As these three key influences can be generalized to an entire campus student population, because institutions often provide separate spaces and services specific to their student-athlete population, it is necessary to translate them in order to specifically represent the congruence of the student-athlete experience. When modified to reflect the student-athlete role, these key environmental influences may be identified as follows: 1) Athlete-Coach relationships; 2) Teammates and athlete communities; 3) Student-athlete support services.

These three factors, whether specific to students or athletes, often provide significant influence towards individual's psychosocial development throughout their college experience. In consideration of sexual identity development for college male student-athletes, these components and relationships within their immediate peer culture will be impactful on their development positively or negatively in moving towards desired outcomes. For instance, if members of his surrounding peer culture system subscribe to a traditional homophobic perspective of sport for males, these attitudes and any accompanying negative language or behavior, whether targeted directly or indirectly towards the individual, will most likely hinder his development and experience.

Sexual Identity Development

As literature suggests identity development foundations as both sociological and psychological (Evans et al, 2010), it is in D'Augelli's *Life Span Model of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity Development* that I feel best captures the influence of peer culture

as part of the social construction that is the basis of the framework. It is the opinion and experience of the researcher that sexual orientation is a socially invisible identity trait and is only truly known by those with whom the individual discloses. Furthermore, the societal oppression that has historically surrounded the LGBT community may also create feelings of denial and anxiety of which can inhibit sexual identity development for those questioning their sexuality (Evans et al, 2010).

As D'Augelli's (1994) model accounts for "the complex factors that influence the development of people in context over historical time" (Evans et al, 2010, p. 315), it specifies three interrelated variables significant to identity development: 1) Personal subjectivities and actions; 2) Interactive intimacies; 3) Sociohistorical connections.

As personal subjectivities involve the attributes an individual associates to their sexual identity, it is within the interactive intimacies that peer culture influence and impact are represented. Attitudes, perceptions and actions of family, friends, and teammates, for example, have significant impact on sexual identity development outcomes as positive or negative. These interactive intimacies also very closely relate to Chickering's key influences regarding relationships between the individual and those that surround him on campus as previously discussed. D'Augelli's (1994) sociohistorical connections refer to the overarching policy, laws, and social norms associated with sexual identity and expression in a given culture, which suggests that these may change with any shift in society over time. This may be represented by the positive shift and improvement of the culture of sport for LGBT individuals as mentioned earlier.

Between these two theoretical frameworks exists parallels of which inform the focus of this research. With an explicit concentration on the peer culture system and the

influences it exerts upon the developing individual, both of these theories capture the potential influence of interpersonal interactions. Additionally, they both account for the individual's own thoughts and feelings about themselves and their identity as it develops, as well as the overarching norms of culture and society and how they may change over time. The distinction of Chickering's focus on development during college combined with D'Augelli's focus on sexual identity development further marry the specific variables associated with the population in which this research examines. The congruence and collaboration of these two theories with the previous literature discussion lends to the following conceptualization of which will guide the operationalization of the research plan.

Research Questions

This study proposed three research questions of which represent this current investigation, as well as the direction I feel research in this area needs to continue heading regarding issues of sexual identity development and experience for college male student-athletes. These questions are as follows:

- 1) How do gay male intercollegiate student-athletes navigate their sexual identity development while in college?
- 2) What micro-level variables of the college male student-athlete peer culture promote or inhibit sexual identity development and for gay or questioning individuals?
- 3) How do both athletic- and academic-specific factors compare in their support of the gay college male student-athlete development and experience?

Throughout previous literature, there has been great focus on attitudes towards homosexuality and gay athletes. However, little attention has been directed towards the developing individual and understanding the sexual identity process or identifying the peer culture influences that positively support and promote sexual identity development within the context of sports as part of the academic setting specifically. Furthermore, in consideration of academic environments, literature is sparse when considering the comparison of the student-athlete profile, the dual roles they fulfill, and the interactions across those dual peer cultures as it relates to an individual's sexual identity development. As there is a current trend of improving sport culture for LGBT individuals, it is also important to consider the contexts of sport norms and at what level these traditional beliefs still influence sport participation, identity development, and the opportunity for successful outcomes.

As we know that sport culture has improved, including the visibility and influence allies, we also know that there is still a lot of work to be done in order to further reduce homophobia from sport. As mentioned earlier, organizations have emerged and are focused on improving sport climate and creating more inclusive spaces through the voice of allies. At the college level, the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) is the largest governing body of intercollegiate athletics pursuits with a total of 1,110 member institutions across three divisions (NCAA, N.D.). Yet, considering the scope of institutions of higher education offering intercollegiate athletics opportunities, very little documented effort is available representing the use of the ally voice and role to engage peers in efforts to improve sport culture. Furthermore, little to no assessment is being done regarding the impact of ally influence in general. Literature suggests that although

college campuses have been centers for an improved change in attitudes towards LGBT individuals, athletics departments have been slow to respond. However, it is suggested within the literature that both college students and student-athletes can be the catalysts for changing the campus sports culture (McLellan et al, 2012).

The NCAA recently released their resource “Champions of Respect” of which focuses on creating more inclusive spaces among their member institutions, personnel, and student-athletes (NCAA, 2012). This document is a comprehensive representation of issues and is purposive towards helping athletics departments improve their own environments by providing information and strategies. Generally speaking, as the visibility of LGBT individuals is much greater, the NCAA has responded by creating some useful tools to help their constituents remain current and aware. It is with new resources such as this that evaluation is now needed in order to assess whether a tool such as this is actually being utilized, and if so, the impact it may contribute on improved climate. One challenge related to the release of this document is that there is no requirement or expectation of the institution or their personnel to address or apply the information.

Conceptual Framework

In moving forward with this current research, it is in Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (2009) ecological systems model that I suggest as framework that best represents this discussion of peer culture influence. Renn and Arnold (2003) later advanced the model as specific to college peer culture systems.

Ecological Systems Model

Bronfenbrenner (2009, p. 21) states, “the ecology of human development is the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation, throughout the life course, between an active, growing human being, and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by the relations between these settings, and the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded”. His ecological systems model incorporates a “system of nested, interdependent, dynamic structures ranging from the proximal...to the most distal...” and presents the notion that development is an evolving function of the interactions between the person and environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). With the individual located at the center of the model, the four main components include: 1) Process; 2) Person; 3) Context; 4) Time.

The *microsystem* within the model represents the most immediate peer culture components as they relate to the *person* individually, with development occurring through face-to-face interactions (*process*), within various settings (*context*), and increasing over *time* as these interactions grow more complex (Bronfenbrenner, 2009). For a college male student-athlete, his on-campus microsystem may consist of athlete and non-athlete peers, advisors, tutors, trainers, faculty members, and coaches, which may be specific to either the student or athlete role explicitly, or influential across both roles simultaneously for the individual. Additionally, settings such as the locker room, his dorm room, the classroom, and advising centers also represent contextual elements of his microsystem.

The model’s *mesosystem* represents the interactions and links between multiple microsystem components, including *ecological niches* (specific regions within the

environment that contain specific characteristics), all of which can positively or negatively impact development (Bronfenbrenner, 2009). For a college male athlete, the microsystem components of coach/academic advisor/tutor create a mesosystem, or ecological niche, that may positively influence the individual's academic and cognitive development within the contexts associated with navigating a rigorous athletic and academic schedule. However, a mesosystem consisting of a dynamic representing a teammate's homophobic attitudes and the individual's developing sexual identity, these negative attitudes of a teammate peer may deter the individual from exploring or disclosing their sexual identity further.

In regards to student-athletes and their dual role on campus, I feel it is imperative for each role as student and athlete to be examined distinct from the other. As some peer culture components are salient within both roles simultaneously, each role also contains its own specific peer culture components. For example, as a teammate may also be a classmate, the professor provides academic leadership representing specific ideas and expectations as parallel to the coach that represents athletic leadership with separate and distinct expectations. Therefore, a positive influence towards diverse sexual identities provided by classroom leadership may differ significantly than from a negative influence provided within athletic spaces by a coach that may subscribe to traditionally homophobic norms in sport.

Examining components across both roles may be useful in order to identify potential relationships that significantly induce or inhibit development. The context of campus housing for example often includes both student-athletes and non-athletes living amongst each other. This type of common living space environment may exert

conflicting influences when considering sexual identity development opportunities based upon the attitudes of individuals that also participate in traditional athletic spaces versus those who do not.

The ecological systems model also accounts for influences further removed from the individual but nevertheless still maintain influence upon their development.

Components such as institutional policy and NCAA guidelines are examples of Bronfenbrenner's (2009) *exosystem*, in which the individual is not involved specifically, yet their influence may impact his own actions, as well as actions of members within his immediate peer culture. The *macrosystem*, which involves the overarching cultural norms and expectations, is the most distant from the individual, and is shaped by conditions or events over time (Bronfenbrenner, 2009).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model will be helpful in regards to future investigations into the development and experiences of the college male student-athlete in relation to his peer culture. Additionally, this model also lends to the continued inquiry of attitudes of homophobia and perceptions of LGBT identity within the context of sport, and has potential to inform strategies for creating more inclusive sport spaces.

Synthesizing the Theory

The parallels discussed between Chickering and D'Augelli translate well when considering Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model. Figure 1 represents Bronfenbrenner's system of nested factors that surround the developing individual. As outlined, the microsystem represents those influences and interactions closest to the individual, while the macrosystem represents factors more removed of which guide thoughts, beliefs, and actions.

In revisiting identity theory, as Chickering discusses peer relations and friendships as key influencers, D'Augelli's interactive intimacies also represent meanings and experiences associated with interpersonal interactions. These peer group relations comprise an individual's microsystem and are the primary focus of this inquiry. To reiterate, the mesosystem thus encompasses any interactions across these relationships and are of interest to this research as it pertains to the individual student-athlete's dual roles related to both academic and athletic pursuits.

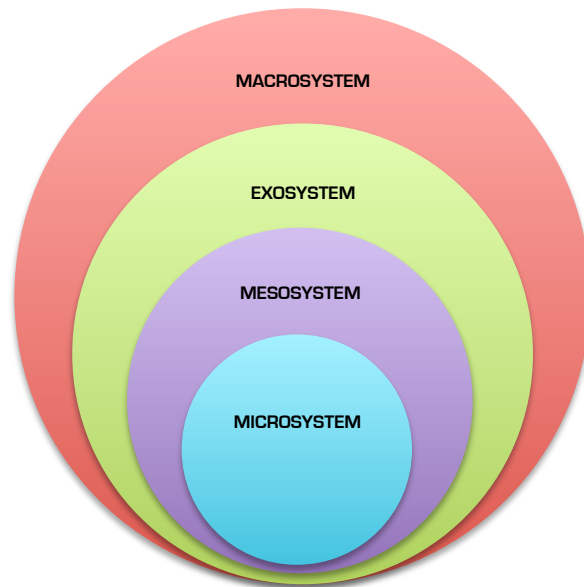


Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's (2009) Ecological Systems Model

In consideration of each of the research questions, it is the goal of this investigation to identify which components of peer culture, as they pertain to both the microsystem and mesosystem, promote and inhibit sexual identity development for male student-athletes. As the literature suggests that cultural and societal norms promote homophobia among males in sports, current literature also indicates that there is a positive trend that is creating a shift in these norms towards more inclusivity.

Figure 2 represents a conceptualized process of peer culture influence upon an individual's identity development. First, the individual is identified by their distinct roles as either/both student and/or athlete as it pertains to the microsystem representing specific interactions. The figure is representative of the overlap that may occur across these two roles. As the individual engages in peer group interactions, these interactions will influence either positive or negative experiences and outcomes.

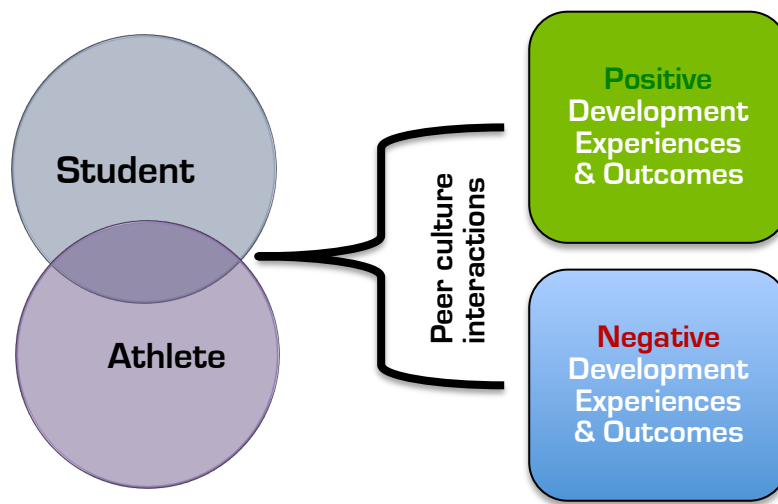


Figure 2: Conceptualized Process of Peer Culture Influence

CHAPTER III

METHOD & DATA ANALYSIS

This research inquiry utilized a qualitative approach to empirically investigate experience of gay college male student-athletes and the influence of their surrounding on-campus peer culture in which their lives are embedded while attending college and participating in intercollegiate athletics activities. A qualitative inquiry helps us to better explore, understand and interpret social interactions (Lichtman, 2006). Semi-structured interviews guided each conversation and the forthcoming discussion represents a narrative analysis of the lived experience of each participant.

The epistemology that guides and characterizes this study resides within the framework of constructivist and interpretivist paradigms. As constructivists construct their reality within their own mind, through individual reflection, meanings of their realities will have greater opportunity to surface (Ponterotto, 2005). Interpretivism suggests that there is no one single reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and that these multiple realities are socially constructed (Carson, Gilmore, Perry, & Gronhaug, 2001). Regarding the methods utilized for this study, these paradigms encourage more flexibility among the research structures (Carson et al, 2001) and foster a more collaborative process between the researcher and participant (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988), while placing emphasis upon the individual's experience and their interpretation of it (Henning, 2004). Therefore, according to Hudson & Ozanne (1988), the overall goal and objective is to interpret and understand the meaning of the individual's behavior in general.

Setting and Participants

This study inquired about the experience of openly gay male college student-athletes, with emphasis upon the impact of the peer culture system within which their experience is embedded. Therefore, the setting for this study was college campus environments. This research sought currently matriculated college student-athletes in order to explore the most recent experience possible as related to their on-campus engagement. Purposive sampling was used to identify potential participants, each defined by the following qualities: male, openly gay, intercollegiate varsity-level student-athlete, and with a minimum age of 18 years old.

A total of six gay male athletes participated in this study. All participants met the criteria for participation and, at the time of the interview, each was currently matriculated at a college or university and participated in an intercollegiate sport sponsored or recognized by the NCAA. However, the length of time or experience at their respective institutions varied based upon their athletic eligibility or grade level.

As a condition of their participation, anonymity was ensured and is represented by the use of pseudonyms to replace names. Also, no identification of either their sport or institution is offered. The table below presents each participant's pseudonym, their grade level (based upon athletic eligibility), and whether they participated in a team- or individual-oriented sport. Team sports are represented by those athletic activities that require several team members to be on the court or field simultaneously competing together (i.e. Football, Baseball,

Basketball, Soccer, etc.). Individual sports, although utilizing a team scoring system, are represented by athletic activities that engage the athlete individually as a representative of his team (i.e. Track & Field, Swimming, Tennis, Golf, etc.).

	Grade/Eligibility Level	Team or Individual Sport
Mark	Senior	Team
Karl	Junior	Team
Bobby	Sophomore	Team
Shane	Senior	Individual
Nate	Senior	Individual
Matthew	Junior	Individual

Table 1. Participants

Even though some individuals had previously offered a personal account of their experience as an openly gay male college athlete, ensuring anonymity was a strategic choice on my part in order to foster the most authentic narrative regarding their experience and the peer culture system that surrounds them on campus.

During one interview, the participant reconfirmed that his identity and information would be anonymous as part of this study before sharing details about interactions with specific individuals within this athletic department.

Gaining Access

Outsports.com, a popular online gay-themed sport media outlet, regularly profiles openly gay and lesbian athletes most often represented by a first-person account of the individual’s personal experience in sport. Several of these accounts have been written by openly gay college male student-athletes representing a variety of sports, various levels of intercollegiate varsity sport (i.e. NCAA Division I,

II, III, etc.), and from a broad geographical range spanning the United States. The benefits of purposive sampling for this inquiry are such that these individuals are already out and have chosen to publicly share their gay identity and details describing their experiences. As sexual orientation is a “deep-level characteristic and not easily identifiable” (Sartore, 2007, p. 47), a purposive criterion-based sampling approach drawn from the collection of first-person accounts found at Outsports.com assisted in the identification of openly gay individuals as potential participants among the target population of publicly gay college male student-athletes. Additionally, helping to simplify this process, many of these online personal accounts included an email address for the individual for purposes of direct contact with them by those wishing to inquire further about their story and/or experience. This provided the access point to contact individuals with a formal invitation to participate in this study.

An official Human Subjects Application was submitted to the Institutional Review Board at the University of Washington with a request for an expedited and exempt approval given the minimal risk to the prospective participants, including securing their anonymity. Following notification of approval, a total of 13 individuals, all of whom matched the criteria as an openly gay male college-level varsity athlete, either currently matriculated or removed within one year of their participation, and whom offered an email address for follow-up contact, were contacted via a ‘Participant Recruitment Email’ invitation (Appendix A). Among those invited, four individuals agreed to an interview. Two additional participants were added as a result of snowball sampling of which unexpectedly led to the identification of these individuals.

It is important to note that as interviews were taking place, additional athlete stories surfaced on Outsports.com representing individuals that also fit the criteria for this research. As such, these additional individuals were invited to participate via the same email protocol as the earlier prospective participants. However, no additional participants were added as they either did not respond or did not agree to partake.

Data Collection Procedures

Semi-Structured Interviews

The data source for this study involved the use of semi-structured interviews. Interviews allow participants to utilize their own voice to share specific details of their experiences (Markula & Silk, 2011). Barriball and While (1994) explained why semi-structured interviews are appropriate for certain data collection stating, “they are well suited for the exploration of the perceptions and opinions of respondents regarding complex and sometimes sensitive issues and enable probing for more information and clarification of answers” (pg. 330). As Patton (2003) explains, the semi-structured interview approach offers data based upon “how those being interviewed view their world, to learn their terminology and judgments, and to capture the complexities of their individual perceptions and experiences” (p. 348).

An interview protocol was created (Appendix B) of which an introduction to the research inquiry was shared with each participant prior to the beginning of the interview. The semi-structured outline of the survey questions entailed three areas of focus: 1) recounting and elaborating upon the online story or personal account previously shared by each participant; 2) discussing the impact and influence of their surrounding peer

culture; 3) opportunity to share additional and/or concluding thoughts about their experience.

In order to allow participants ample opportunity and a comfortable space to describe their personal experiences, one-on-one interviews were conducted. As all interviews occurred over the phone due to the lack of proximity of the researcher to the participants located around the country, this also allowed opportunity and discretion for each participant to select a suitable location within which to share details about their experience over the phone. All interviews were scheduled for 60-minutes and recorded.

Given that most of the athletes were identified as a prospective participant via an online written personal representation of their individual experience, I began their interviews by providing a brief recap of each story respective to the participant. The following statement by the researcher recounted their online story:

From reading your story online, I understand that you...(I then recapped details as drawn from their story).

Each participant then had the opportunity to clarify any discrepancies in the researcher's statement, which assisted in the triangulation of preliminary data leading up to the interview.

Participants were then asked the following open-ended questions to begin the interview:

When you think about your experiences as an openly gay college male student-athlete, what comes to mind?

These and other open-ended questions were intended to guide the interview if needed, yet were more so intended to allow the participant opportunity to freely share his thoughts

and experiences (Markula & Silk, 2011). Additionally, it was important that I refrained from asking questions that may have led participants a certain direction with their responses or that were based upon researcher assumption regarding their experiences. The intended interview protocol and examples of questions can be found in the attached Appendix B.

As part of the semi-structured approach, each interview transitioned to focus upon components of the participant's surrounding peer culture including interactions or relationships they had with teammates, coaches, friends, professors, administrators and the like. A definition of peer culture was provided if it was deemed that this concept was unclear to the participant and to ensure the inclusive nature of peer culture to represent all micro-level variables (i.e. coaches, administrators, etc.) as opposed to just teammates, friends or other students.

A final transition within each interview included a guided question focused upon each participant's perception of personal and/or contextual attributes that may be necessary to contribute to experiences being positive. Interviews concluded with an opportunity for each participant to share any additional thoughts and I was granted permission to follow-up with each participant if needed during the data transcription and analysis phase.

Data Analysis

The goal of the data analysis was to code the narratives in order to describe what happened, as well as to effectively represent each participant's experience. Through an inductive analysis, it was important data analysis was approached without assumed conclusions in order to allow the significance of participant responses to emerge on its

own (McMillan, 2012). Once the interviews were transcribed, these transcriptions were reviewed and preliminary notes were recorded to help identify initial themes that relate to the research questions and the theoretical framework (Merriam, 2009). Categorized descriptions were created representing experiences of the participants, respective of the impact of various peer culture components, for example. This coding process provided the strategic focus towards recognizing themes and supported the clustering of information that fit together to create the categories representing specific experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This process was done multiple times in order to help condense the number of clusters dependent upon appropriate connections and groupings throughout the data. This process occurred for each participant. After all data respective to each participant was clustered and re-clustered, the entire collection of data was then be pooled together in order to identify categories that represent similarities across all participants.

Trustworthiness

To approach the challenge of establishing validity and trustworthiness for this study, specific procedures of purposive sampling, triangulation, thick description and reflexive journaling were used (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As outlined previously, purposive sampling was utilized in order to identify prospective participants that represent the specific population and setting being investigated. For this study, participants were identified through their own publicly shared personal accounts of their experiences as an openly gay male college student-athlete.

Triangulation strategies were utilized as a means of checking the integrity of the inferences drawn from the coded data (Schwandt, 2007). Triangulation of information

occurred through analyzing and comparing coded interview data to the details of which each participant outlined previously in their online personal stories, which was confirmed at the beginning of the interview and through various member checks throughout the data analysis process.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) express that the use of thick description is a means to achieve external validity. Geertz (1973) explains that thick description of human behavior describes behavior and its context by providing comments and narratives, as well as interpretations of those comments in order to create meaning about a specific culture. Additionally, thick description allows for the consideration of drawn conclusions to be transferable to other people and settings.

Reflexive journaling was also utilized to allow this researcher to document researcher thoughts, perspectives and reactions throughout the research process. According to Ortlipp (2008), “keeping self-reflective journals is a strategy that can facilitate reflexivity, whereby researchers use their journal to examine ‘personal assumptions and goals’ and clarify ‘individual belief systems and subjectivities’” (p. 695). This procedure was important for this study given my close personal identification to the population and setting being investigated as a former college-level student-athlete who participated openly as a gay male.

Findings in this study were analyzed and are shared in the forthcoming discussion to represent the experiences of gay college male student-athletes as influenced with a specific focus upon their surrounding peer culture systems. The aim for the discussion was to represent experiences in congruence with how each individual shares them and as

framed by the student development theory, the research questions identified for this study, and in regards to the current improving trend of acceptance of gay athletes in sport.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to better understand the experience of openly gay college-level male student-athletes. Underpinning these experiences are peer culture components that may positively or negatively influence experience as a result of an individual's interaction and engagement with them. For this study, peer culture influences may include an individual athlete's teammates, other athlete peers, non-athlete peers, as well as the campus environment and its leadership personnel.

A qualitative approach was used to capture data regarding participant experience. From each participant's interview, data was recorded, coded, recoded and categorized into various themes. From this process, the following five themes emerged representing the experience of these gay male student-athletes: *The Individual and Their Campus; Coming Out on Campus; Interactions with Campus Personnel; Advocacy Interests and Efforts; Individual Attributes for Positive Experience.*

A total of six participants were interviewed. All participants were presently matriculated in school and participating with their team in athletics-related activities at the time of their interview. Participant anonymity is ensured through the use of pseudonyms. Additionally, sport and school names are not included in order to further protect participant identity.

The Individual and Their Campus

To provide context about each participant and their campus environment, brief participant and campus profiles are shared regarding each setting and the individual's undergraduate grade level at the time the interview took place. Setting information includes the type of school, including whether it is public or private, and whether the campus climate is conservative or liberal based upon the participant's perception as an openly gay student-athlete. Also, based upon current information extracted from each participant's respective college website, identified below are approximate undergraduate student populations for their school, the total number of varsity-level athletics teams offered at each institution, as well as the level within the NCAA in which their athletics teams identify and compete.

Furthermore, in order to better understand the profile of each participant, it is discussed how each individual chose their respective school, whether their developing identity as a gay male was a factor in that decision, followed by a discussion of their identity on campus. This information provides increased context for the findings and discussion thereafter.

Participant Profiles

Mark

Mark is a senior, participating in his final year of varsity athletics. He attends a small private liberal arts college and described the campus climate as being very conservative. The undergraduate student population is approximately 1,500 students, with 14 varsity-level athletic teams (including seven men's teams) participating at the NCAA Division II level. He identified as in the closet prior to

college, with the belief that any thoughts regarding a gay identity would be suppressed once he entered college. He considers himself to be a team leader and significant contributor to his team's success.

Karl

Karl is a junior, participating in his third year of varsity athletics. He attends a private university and described the campus climate as conservative. The undergraduate student population is approximately 14,000 students, with 36 varsity-level sports (17 men's teams) participating at the NCAA Division I level. He was in the closet upon entering college and did not initially believe that coming out to teammates was something that needed to happen and that his developing gay identity and participation in sports should remain separate. He describes himself as a starter and major contributor for his team.

Bobby

Bobby is a sophomore, participating in his second year of varsity athletics. He attends a private liberal arts university that he described as a liberal campus environment. The school's undergraduate enrollment is approximately 3,500 students, as the university sponsors a total of 25 varsity-level sports (12 men's teams) at the NCAA Division I level. Bobby identified as an openly gay male prior to enrolling in college and describes himself as a major contributor to his team, having earned multiple post-season accolades. He also considers himself to be somewhat of a team leader.

Shane

Shane is a senior, participating in his fourth year of varsity athletics. He attends a public university of which he described as having a moderately liberal culture. The university's undergraduate enrollment is approximately 15,000 students, with 23 varsity sports teams (11 men's teams) competing at the NCAA Division I level.

Shane and Nate are teammates and roommates. Shane identified as being in the closet upon arriving at school and did not initially believe he would come out while in college. He also described himself as a major contributor to his team and their success.

Nate

Nate is a senior, participating in his fourth year of varsity athletics. He attends a public university that he described as having a liberal climate. The university's undergraduate enrollment is nearly 15,000 students and hosts a total of 23 varsity-level sports (11 men's teams) competing at the NCAA Division I level. Nate and Shane are teammates and roommates. He identified as being in the closet upon entering college, although he knew he was gay "since puberty". He believed he would be able to hide his identity throughout college. He described himself as a significant contributor to his team.

Matthew

Matthew is a junior, participating in his third year of varsity athletics. He attends a public university that he described as having a very liberal culture. The university's undergraduate enrollment is approximately 21,000 students. The university is represented by 19 varsity-level athletics teams (including nine men's teams), all

competing at the NCAA Division I level. Matthew identified as an openly gay male prior to starting college. He also described himself as a major contributor to his team very early in his collegiate athletics career, earning him his team’s vote to become a captain for the upcoming season.

Table 2 represents the above participant profiles, their respective institution size and number of varsity athletics programs, as well as the participant’s description of their college campus climate as either liberal or conservative.

	Grade/Eligibility Level	Team or Individual Sport	Identity Prior to College	College Undergrad Enrollment / # of Athletic Teams	Described Campus Culture
Mark	Senior	Team	Not Openly Gay	1500 / 14	Very Conservative
Karl	Junior	Team	Not Openly Gay	14,000 / 36	Conservative
Bobby	Sophomore	Team	Openly Gay	3,500 / 25	Liberal
Shane	Senior	Individual	Not Openly Gay	15,000 / 23	Moderately Liberal
Nate	Senior	Individual	Not Openly Gay	15,000 / 23	Liberal
Matthew	Junior	Individual	Openly Gay	21,000 / 19	Very Liberal

Table 2. Participant & Campus Profiles

Choosing a School

Participants discussed their arrival at their respective school choice, most identified criteria they were seeking and described the process by which they came to that decision regarding which college to engage in both academic and athletic pursuits. Two participants, Bobby and Matthew, described their respective identities as out and openly gay prior to college. However, Matthew was the only individual that mentioned he was specifically seeking a liberal campus environment.

I went on tours of schools. All of the schools I applied to were in this area and I settled on [college name]. Its liberal reputation was a really big factor and it was close to home and stuff. I had one of those big college reference books and it specifically describes [school name] as a liberal mecca. Its size

was also comforting as well. In my mind a big school would be better because it would be easier to find a place for you to fit in.

Matthew also indicated he was not actively recruited by his current college, yet he wrote to the coach explaining what he was looking for in a school, that he wanted to stay close to home and that he wanted to play for him. These criteria may indicate that although participation in athletics was something he was seeking as part of his college experience, it may not have been the highest priority when choosing a school. Seeking a school with a liberal reputation and close to home (i.e. family, peers, etc.) may indicate a priority towards comfort and familiarity as it pertains to his openly gay identity.

Contrary to Matthew's college search process, Shane indicated that he sought out colleges to continue pursuing his sport of choice and then narrowed his choices based upon the school's level of academic regard, even indicating that he utilized his athletic prowess and participation as a catalyst for admissions acceptance.

I would say [sport name] narrowed it down to about five schools originally.

Then, from those I picked what I thought was the best academic fit for me.

To be honest, I had no business getting into [school name] out of high school and leveraged swimming to help get me there.

Similar to Shane, other participants focused their decision for college around their academic and athletic interests. Any regard of an open or developing gay identity was dismissed and not part of the school selection process. This was the case with Mark as he expressed his goal was to be a college-level athlete.

Basically it was situation where I always had a dream of playing at least at the Division II level and it was a good school so I signed.

While for Karl, both academic and athletic factors were at the forefront when choosing a college to attend.

During that time in my life the thought of being gay wasn't really on my mind. My personal identity wasn't something I'd really given a lot of thought to. I really was so focused on getting a good SAT score and getting to play at a really good school. I really had not given much thought to if this place was inclusive or not. It was really about the athletics and academics.

For Bobby, the only other openly gay participant before entering college, although he was out when arriving to campus, he indicated that he chose his school before coming out to his family and high school friends at home. However, his developing identity was not a factor in his school selection process.

So, when I went into college I had been out in my high school and I had come out to my family. I would say I was completely out when I went to college. The irony is that I chose [school name] before I was out. I did not choose [school name] with any consideration of that. It was not part of my criteria for schools or anything like that.

He was mostly looking at schools as an extension of his athletic and academic interests and described specific criteria in what he was looking for in his teammates.

I was mostly looking at academics, the location of the school, and whether or not I liked my teammates. I was really trying to meet the teammates.

What I was looking for is an intelligent team because I have played for teams where the players were not that intelligent and it bothers me so much. So, I was looking for a smart academic school that had a good team.

For most of these individuals, finding the best school environment to engage in athletic and academic pursuits was their priority. The only individual that chose a school for its liberal reputation and with the hopes of finding an environment to fit in was Matthew, the one individual that was out of the closet at the time he made his college selection.

Individual Identity

Regarding their respective individual identities, most of the participants regarded the athlete part of their identity as the most primary. Regardless of their level of development with their gay self when entering into college, being an athlete is most prominent in how they identify. For Nate, he discussed the distinction between being an athlete and being gay.

I guess from the perspective of being an athlete, in general I always identified that as separate from who I was as a person. I certainly identified as an athlete and people know me as an athlete, so I certainly had that title if you will.

For Karl, he expressed the importance of being able to find success in both areas, as an athlete and as a gay male, and with one not impacting the other.

Sexual orientation has no impact on my playing abilities, I can still play the sport that I love, be really passionate about it, and help my teammates

towards a common goal of winning a championship and making it to the NCAA tournament, and that was the most important thing for me, being able to do both, play soccer and by myself.

For Mark, he credited his sport participation for his development and for achieving his goal of being able to compete at the NCAA Division II level.

Every sport, even the ones that I ended up quitting, sport just shaped who I was and ultimately gave me the opportunity to be where I was as a college athlete.

For the two participants that were openly out prior to entering college, their gay identity is also less regarded in lieu of their athletic identity or activities. For Matthew, who sought a liberal environment close to home when selecting his school, his athlete identity takes priority.

In terms of my identity, you know, athlete comes first and me being someone who identifies as gay kind of comes second.

While for Bobby, as during his interview he discussed his LGBT advocacy and outreach as an openly gay high school student-athlete, when arriving on his college campus, similar types of engagement as an extension of his gay self were a secondary focus.

I don't think I came in with the expectation that I was going to be super involved, especially not first semester when we are in season. So, I joined the GSA¹ but didn't do much with it.

¹ GSA refers to 'Gay-Straight Alliance', an organization that works to empower students to combat homophobia in their schools.

Certainly, this is not to conclude that he was not interested in sustaining similar LGBT advocacy and outreach efforts while in college. This lesser effort in this area may be a direct result of his commitment to athletic-related responsibilities. Nonetheless, in his experience, athletics took precedence.

Coming Out on Campus

All of the participants shared their experiences with coming out as a gay male on their respective campuses. Their discussions of their verbal actions associated with their coming out indicate that it primarily occurred among their teammates. Further outing of their identity occurred in other forms, including most often through word of mouth, and even the stories some of them shared publicly online. Even for the two participants that discussed being out in high school, they both shared experiences surrounding the disclosure of their gay identity to their new teammates and coaches. For most of them, this was a deliberate process and pivotal moment, not only to ensure their place within their peer culture systems, but more so as a moment to acknowledge their own self-acceptance of this portion of their personal identity.

For Mark, when entering college, he did not think his experience would amount to acceptance and disclosure. Rather, he felt that new experiences and environments would lead to something different.

My intention or thought process was that when I went to school that I would be starting fresh and everything I was feeling and assuming about myself would just go away. New surroundings, new people, a ton of new

faces, basically saying in a nutshell, you know, you're going to meet your future wife and everything is going to be fine.

Although he was not explicit in his feelings about a gay identity when entering into college, his thought process shared above may suggest that any feelings he may have had about being gay at that time were wrong. He continued by discussing his earliest experiences after arriving on campus and comparing his conservative high school environment to a similar environment at his college, suggesting that this type of environment was a source of the anxiety and frustration he was feeling about his identity.

I quickly realized that this was not going to go away. Obviously, when I first got to campus, its college no matter where you are and there were opportunities to have fun with girls. You had more freedom and everything. And still I was having these crazy reservations and fears and hesitations about everything, and I think a lot of that had to do with, one, not only me thinking that I might be gay, but, two, that I was all of a sudden. I went from a private catholic high school to basically the same environment where all these traditional values...I mean, school has like dorm visiting hours for opposite sex and all of these things telling you to wait until you're married, and all that stuff. It was a weird first semester. Basically the whole freshman year where I went into it assuming it was going to be something it wasn't. I thought it was going to be a new chapter for me where all my frustrations and anxiety would go away but it ended up being kind of worse at first.

Some of the participants initially did not recognize coming out as something that needed to happen or as something that would develop during their college years. For Karl, coming out was not a consideration of his during his early years in college.

My first two years here I wasn't able to share my sexual orientation because I didn't know at the time that that was something I needed to share with my teammates.

While for Nate, even though he identified as gay internally for a large portion of his life, due to an individual struggle with this part of his identity he did not consider coming out while in college.

I've known I was gay basically since puberty. But for me it was so easy to hide and it never really bothered me to a huge extent and when I got to college not much changed. I never even really considered coming out.

For some, the potential jeopardy towards their relationships with their teammates was a big concern.

I stayed reserved about my identity until [sport name] was over. When you join a college athletics team, those are your best friends automatically.

That was what was scariest for me, or made me not do it sooner I guess, because I really valued the friendships, or that brotherhood that I have with my really close friends, both on the team and with people not on the team. I just care a lot about the dynamic of our relationships. I didn't want this to change anything. I didn't want this to be sort of a wall in

between us because I cared about our relationships and friendships more than I did about the issue.

For Shane and Nate, the two roommates and teammates, they unexpectedly learned about one another being gay, with no initial intentions of telling each other as a former teammate of theirs, currently working as a bartender in one of the local gay establishments, encouraged them to talk to one another after learning that they both had an intimate relationship with the same person. When Shane approached Nate to clarify the situation, he provided a vague response about his sexual orientation.

I was kind of found out because one of my gay roommates, just through gay venues, we found each other out and he was the one that knew. I didn't say that I was gay. I was like, yea, it happened. I don't remember all of the details of the conversation. We just went on a drive and we were both kind of beating around the bush, but neither of us had come to terms ourselves with being gay yet, so it was kind of strange. But nothing really came of it. That was the only time we talked about it until Fall of this year when he began, I guess, having trouble with it. And then obviously since we were roommates we talked about it more.

In my conversation with Shane, he did not mention any details of this account. However, knowing that they are close roommates and teammates with one another, it was very easy to distinguish that their mindset and approach were very different leading up to their actual disclosure of their gay identity. Due to their discussions with one another, Nate eventually reached a point of being a bit more

carefree about coming out. After another conversation with one another about coming out, according to Nate, it was Shane that had mentioned he was thinking about coming out and that it would make him happier. As a result of that conversation, it was Nate that took the first step that same night.

It was after that conversation, you know, I'm not one to really care what people think, so why am I not out yet? So, it was like that night that I made the decision and there was really no turning back after that. I told my friend that night and then over the next week I told all the guys in my class on the team. And then the next week I put out my article.

However, for Shane, he was a bit more deliberate in reaching that decision and taking the first step. He provided a very eloquent account of his thought process and approach to coming out. His experiences are similar to the others in that his account combines the influence with his traditional surroundings growing up, as well as his own struggles with a gay identity. But, ultimately, he found the strength and confidence to share his gay identity with others.

It was kind of like me building up structures in my head of what this would actually look like for me. At first I fought it a lot. I was like, I'm having these feelings but this isn't what I want. I really value the idea of having a wife and kids and that idea of having a really nuclear family environment, you know, that's the people I mainly grew up around and that's obviously my family...and I think that I really value family in the traditional sense, but then after coming out you realize that you can still have that. But I didn't know that at the time before I came out, so that was kind of a thing

that I had just built up based on how I'm seeing things...and also just the fact that I think I was very good for a long time about lying to myself about it. So, I guess really deep in the back of my mind I probably knew at the beginning of my junior year this was something that was inevitable and would eventually happen. Once I started telling my close friends, its like, you're pretty committed at that point and I knew that going into it. Once you start coming out, I don't think there is any going back. Once you do it you have to establish yourself and I knew that was important, and I knew that was something that once you cross that line there is no going back. So, I knew that I needed to be fully okay with it in my head and sort of know where my future was going from there. There is a discovery phase and that took me probably a year and a half or so before I went from that to actually coming out to the public and my friends.

Like Nate, Shane chose the same peers within their same grade level to come out to first.

Following our conference championships I started coming out to guys on the team that I was pretty close with, which mainly included the senior class. It was really nerve wracking at first and then it just sort of got easier. You know you also have to play the game, you know, who do you want to directly tell and who do you sort of want to let find out.

Obviously, there are guys on the team that I've known really closely for three years and ones that are on the team starting six months ago. It was

definitely playing that game a little bit, but word spread pretty quickly through the team.

For some of the other guys, teammates were also the first to whom they came out. Karl had a specific reason for choosing the one teammate to be the first person he told.

In terms of the first person that I told, it was a teammate. I felt he was a person that I could count on and I felt I knew he would be supportive 100%. I felt by telling him it would be a way for me to start to be okay and accept myself as a gay male. Not only did telling him help me on my journey towards self-acceptance, but it also gave me the confidence to say hey its okay that I am gay because my teammates, my friends and my family will still support me and love me for who I am. And, I felt that by being honest too, I felt our relationship got stronger and we've become better friends by me sharing a part of who I am with him.

For Bobby, as he was out before he entered into college, he still deliberated at what point he would actually share or confirm this part of his identity with his teammates. But like Shane and Nate, he also told teammates in his own class first.

The summer before my freshman year I attended this kind of pre-season recruiting camp. A lot of the newly committed athletes usually come. My entire incoming class of eight guys was at the camp. Some of us were sitting at dinner and they were going around saying, 'Oh, who has a girlfriend?' And it got to me, and I was dating a guy at the time, and I knew beforehand that I didn't want to be in the closet while I was at

school but I wasn't sure if I should wait a couple of months and then tell them. And I pretty much figured that would make it a much bigger deal than I wanted it to be, if I like lied and then told the truth. So I said, 'I actually have a boyfriend'. At first they thought I was joking and then were like, 'Oh, you're serious?'" They actually were all fine with it but I was freaking out the whole time.

For Mark, his on-campus coming out experience differed from the others. Coming from the most conservative environments, it was during the summer between his junior and senior years in college that he made the decision to seek support to come out on campus. He connected with an associate with the non-profit organization GO! Athletes. This associate had previously posted a story publicly online about his experience as an openly gay college male athlete. Upon connecting, Mark disclosed that he was a closeted athlete and that he had read his story online. It was through this connection that Mark started to view his identity differently.

He really helped me to kind of realize my opportunity at where I was. You know, I always knew it was conservative but I didn't really understand what I could do in my position in terms of getting the word out and possibly coming out. Not only did he want me to do it because he did it at his school and it was like the best thing ever for his career and time at school. But, he saw the opportunity as a story that could really make an impact. After about a month in talking with him, he got me in touch with Outsports and they told me they would post my story. I guess the selfless part of me started coming out because I started thinking of my six years

prior to that when I felt completely alone like no one else had ever gone through this and I had never ended up seeing or reading anything like that. At that point in the year the only people that didn't know were my coaches and teammates. So, I thought it was kind of stupid at that point especially because I had known half the guys on the team for three or four years. So, there was one point where I decided you know, I'm going to do this story and I'm going to tell everyone. And that's when the process of writing my story, telling my coaches and coming out to my teammates started from.

Unlike the other participants in this study, it was to a coach that Mark first disclosed his gay identity. As Mark had set his sights on sharing his story online, he felt a responsibility to tell his coaches and teammates first.

So, when I came to Outsports with the story I basically said its not fair to come out with this story if I haven't even come out yet and I don't want them to hear from a story on the internet. So then I went to my head coach first. He was very good about it in like he said, "You're Mark. This is not going to affect anything. We just want our season to be business as usual." So that was good for me because I wanted to do it before the season so it would not be a distraction. That was one of my main kind of apprehensions or worries about it that it was going be like this big thing that I, you know, wouldn't be able to focus on [sport name]. Which, we took care of it and it ended up not being that big of a deal. So, once I told my head coach I started telling everyone on my team. It was a little

different how I told people. Like I said, some of them had been teammates for four years, and some of them I had known for only a couple of weeks, like the freshmen and we had a couple of transfers. But with everyone, I at least sat them down individually to talk to them. I didn't want to do something like a team meeting and do it as a whole team. I just felt like some of them deserved a little bit more, if that makes sense, than me just reading off of a piece of paper and then talking to them. Whether it was at a party or in between classes. So, a lot of them were like at a party at our house or another party where I was like, "Can I talk to you for a second?" and then take them outside. It was like a really nerve wracking two weeks because I would get really nervous every time I was going to tell someone else, which was so stupid because what is different about telling one person versus the other.

Like the others, Mark handled coming out to teammates differently based upon their grade level or his length of time knowing them as a teammate. Additionally, he made accommodations for his teammates, giving them respect to hear it from him individually and to not read about his identity somewhere else. Making accommodations for teammates was a common theme among participants when reaching the decision to actually coming out to them.

As coming out is one of the most personal, critical, and important moments for a gay individual in order to achieve a life of self-acceptance, a positive self-identity, and for creating an opportunity to live truthfully, it was interesting to listen to the participants discuss the respect and accommodation they had for their

teammates and coaches, often accounting for their feelings in anticipation of what the experience will be like for them to learn that a team member. Similar to Mark, Bobby approached his coach first when he reached the decision to write and publish an online story in order to gain his approval as it may be a potential reflection upon the program.

Before I even posted it I went to my coach and asked him if it was okay that I do this, because I knew that as soon as I did this, if anyone were to look up [school name] they might see this and frankly, it might effect your recruiting. Like, a player that might otherwise come here might not if he sees that I'm on the team. That could potentially happen. And my coach said, "You know what? I don't want him on my team anyways." So, he told me to go for it and we'll send it to the athletic director and he'll spread it around.

For Karl, he wanted to provide a space for his teammates to share their feelings with him.

I told most of my teammates individually because then they could express how they really felt about it. I thought this was a better way than sharing it in front of the team and having it be a big announcement because then you have to worry about a lot of group think going on or people hiding how they really feel about it.

Similarly, Shane told teammates individually, not wanting to offend anyone if he did not come out to them personally and directly.

I did it individually, to those I consider more close to me on the team, who I felt like they should hear it from me first. I had to think, who are the people who would feel put off if they found this out through someone else, like, who should I just really sit down with.

Shane's roommate and teammate Nate took the same approach in telling people individually and also discussed how he tried to create greater levels of comfort among his teammates regarding his gay identity.

I just appreciate being open and honest. So, once I came out, I thought that talking about it would be the best way to make my teammates comfortable and that really did show through. It wasn't swept under the rug. We could talk about it openly and make jokes about it. Its little things like that that you know your teammates are comfortable because they are not uncomfortable joking around about it.

For Matthew, being out as an openly gay male prior to college meant that many people learned about his identity on social media and through word of mouth. He explained that his coming out to people is not very direct, rather it is a much more casual approach that has a utility to combat any awkwardness that may be felt.

Usually, now when I tell people I'm gay, usually I don't just say "I'm gay." I will just slip in something like, "Oh, I think that guy is hot." Or, you know, "Oh, my ex-boyfriend...". I kind of do that. You know, I come out like straight people come out. To one of my teammates, who is definitely a little more conservative, I guess he didn't know I was gay or he didn't see my profile online. It was us two getting dinner, one-on-one during one of

the first nights of school. He asked me if I would ever hook up with one of the girls on the team. And I was like, "Oh no, I'm gay." And he just looked really surprised. One of the reasons I like coming out so casually and not just explicitly saying "I'm gay" is that if I just say it really smoothly and go with the flow and keep the conversation going it treats it like its totally normal.

This is similar to Nate in that the gay identity quickly becomes part of conversation, with little to no reservation in talking about or referencing it. As mentioned earlier, Bobby incorporated the same tactic, making the decision to more casually mention he had a boyfriend while at dinner with his new teammates as a means of confirming his sexual orientation.

As their experiences are understood, there is no indication of a right or wrong way to come out. Rather, it appears to have been a matter of their own preparedness to take that step, with each individual transitioning towards their official coming out experience in the best moment. What is learned from these participants is that, similarly, they all told team personnel first, most sharing their identity with teammates initially. Additionally, several of them referred to accommodating others when coming out in attempt to make the situation more comfortable for them in learning this about their teammate.

When considering their opportunities to pass or reveal their sexual orientation (Cunningham, 2011; Clair et al, 2005), the revealing process was part of each individual's experience on campus, whether they were out prior to enrolling in college or not. Normalizing was evident with two participants as they discussed

their casual suggestion of their sexual orientation as they incorporated comments into a common conversation among peers. Additionally, most of the participants differentiated themselves by expressing how their sexual orientation differs from others that were teammates and roommates.

Individual differences (Cunningham, 2011; Clair et al, 2005) were also evident when considering the risk involved for Mark and Karl associated with revealing their gay sexual orientation within a conservative environment. Additionally, also evident were high levels of self-assuredness for Karl, Bobby and Matthew, all of whom discussed their gay identity either prior to entering college and/or leading to their involvement on campus with LGBT advocacy efforts on their campus.

Interactions with Campus Personnel

As one of the primary areas of focus of this study, interactions with their surrounding environment were discussed throughout each interview. Very few discussions occurred regarding any daily or consistent interactions with non-athletics peers aside from the typical on-campus engagement in such spaces like the classroom or dormitory. However, some participants discussed specific influences that aided their development or experience. Additionally, themes emerged regarding the response to their online stories, participant's lack of interest in visiting or utilizing any on-campus LGBT-related resource, and interactions with teammates regarding offensive behavior or language, as well as living with teammates as roommates.

For most of the participants, their teammates and life as a student-athlete took precedence over anything not directly related to their academic or athletics pursuits. Shane shared this very clearly in the following comments:

I just see my athletic life and there are three stakeholders, me, the athletic department, and I put the coaches in with them, and my teammates. I see my teammates as someone very important in that because we spend 25 hours a week together training and living our lives basically inseparably and they're all my close friends.

As Mark discussed, his non-athlete peer circle was very limited.

I didn't have many friends that were not athletes. I think that's just who hung out with each other. As an athlete, I was very busy. My best friend was a member of the women's basketball team. I'm sure there would have been a bunch of people that would have supported me even at this conservative college. I just never hung out with them much.

And considering Mark's school, the undergraduate population is about 1,500 students, while the school sponsors 14 varsity-level sports. This represents the highest ratio of student-athletes among their undergraduate population among all of the participants' schools. Given the overall discussions and the notion that most of the participants lived exclusively with teammates (which is discussed ahead), it is not a surprise that these individuals do not identify very strongly or closely with a non-athletics centric peer group.

Three participants discussed specific non-athletics personnel that were influential to their experience, both of them serving in non-student roles at their

respective schools. Matthew shared his interaction with an instructor of whom taught a life skills class for first-year student athletes, during which she included some discussion pertaining to LGBT-related issues.

She was more like a wellness figure at [school name]. She was also an activist on campus for LGBT people in athletics. It was really great to see these issues being discussed among other wellness issues. You know, the class was mostly about how to take notes and stuff. Some of the athletes in the class disclosed being uncomfortable with some of the issues, but it didn't seem hostile at all.

Matthew's appreciation for this class and the LGBT-related content seemed to provide additional comfort for his transition to college as an openly gay athlete.

Like Matthew, Bobby also experienced an academic space in which the instructor created an inclusive dialogue about LGBT identity, relationships and issues.

I took one gender studies class and a psych class. And when the teacher was talking about relationships within psychology, she intentionally used inclusive language and talked about sexuality in an accepting way. And that was kind of surprising because I had not seen that in a classroom setting before.

For Nate, he discussed his friendship with an openly gay advisor on campus that may have provided some influence towards his own self-acceptance as a gay man.

Before my article came out, one of my academic advisors, I knew he was gay because he mentioned his boyfriend one time. And so, before my article came out I asked if we could grab lunch and I came out to him over lunch. And he was so happy for me and we've been great friends ever since.

As these three participants shared specific experiences with non-athletics personnel, another interesting theme that emerged from these interviews is the participants' lack of interest in visiting or utilizing on-campus LGBT support resources. As Shane describes, this specific type of support may conflict too much with his identity as an athlete, of which all participants identified was more prominent and important than identifying as a gay man.

I guess gay culture, or how I perceive it, that was like a turn off for me. I never thought to go to a resource center. That was just too in your face, just too much for me. I think centers are a turn-off for athletes.

Matthew discussed similar sentiments relating to his athlete identity even though he also proclaimed that his school is home to a very well known LGBT college resource center.

When I'm looking for support or anything, my first instinct is to go to one of my friends, obviously someone within athletics. That's why its always been sort of secondary, you know, to go to the [resource center name]. I was having this conversation with some people about how you need to go through athletics to get to LGBT people, rather than go through LGBT

people to reach athletes, which is a little backwards I guess in how I think most athletes identify.

As Mark described, the conservative nature of his college is not a place where he expected to see anything that resembled support for LGBT individuals.

There was nothing in any sort of gay community or anything at my school. A couple years before I got to school there, there was a group of students, some gay and some straight, they wanted to start a gay-straight alliance and the school turned it down because they said it was against the school's policy and values. So, I had known about that prior and there was definitely no sort of a gay community or understanding of who's gay on campus or any sort of interaction in that way at all. There was absolutely no on campus resource center. That will be the last group that would ever step on my college campus.

As Mark discussed the lack of a resource center on his campus, this did not reflect on whether or not he would have utilized a resource center as a source of support for himself. For Nate, he did not mention any engagement with a campus LGBT-specific resource for support and further shared that if an athletics-based resource (i.e. Athlete Ally) had a chapter on campus, he is not sure he would have engaged with them either.

Now, coming out, I could see that as being something that is helpful. But for me, truthfully, I'm wondering if it was in place if I would have used it,

like an Athlete Ally or something like that. As a resource to help come out, I feel that I didn't need that.

For Bobby, as one of two participants that identified as openly gay prior to entering college, he was the only participant that discussed any prior advocacy efforts through the GSA at his high school. He discussed his college's GSA and how their efforts for support were limited.

It is not much of an activism group. It's more like a let's hang out and have a safe space. Which is one of my frustrations with it but I know that is needed so I don't really mind. They are located in the main student center.

When asked whether or not the LGBT center engages the campus community in LGBT issues, he responded:

Not particularly. So most of the advocacy stuff I've done is my own doing.

His comments lend transition to the advocacy interests and efforts among these participants, which will be discussed in a forthcoming results section.

Online Story Reactions

For participants that wrote and shared an online story, most discussed the overwhelming amount of outreach they received in response to their public disclosure about their gay identity and personal experience. For Bobby, he discussed how much awareness there was regarding his story.

It spread a ton through [school name] channels. Alumni responded. Teachers responded. Coaches responded. The President of the university emailed me and said, "I read your article. Good job." A very large number

of alumni reached it and the common theme was, "You make me very proud to be from [school name]."

For Nate, he defined the outreach as "overwhelming" and "absurd" regarding the level or response he received to his online story.

Once my article came out, it was unsocial to not be accepting of me. I don't want to say that I was gay famous here, but I was kind of gay famous. At bars I had many people coming up to me and congratulating me. I had a professor do the same. Several people emailed me and saying if you need anything just contact me. And that's not even including the hundreds of text messages and emails from staff and friends.

As Mark had indicated he came out to his coach and teammates prior to releasing his online story, it was among the college and athletics administrative personnel from which a negative reaction and response was experienced, of which may have influenced some of the response from his coaches of which he discussed.

The day my article came out they had an emergency meeting with all of the coaches, because apparently this was a state of emergency, and basically just told everyone to not talk about it. Everyone was informed to not to even talk to me about it personally. Even if they had anything negative or positive to say, they weren't allowed to talk to me about it. And that all kind of stemmed from the school itself. I had a lot of trouble just being able to publish the article with the school. I wanted to go and get clearance from them just so I wouldn't face any legal issues with slandering or anything like that. Which is funny, because my article was

actually praising the college for being such a great place. But, the college wanted nothing to do with the article and they didn't want the college's name in the article. They wanted to make sure none of that was mentioned because of their values and what they stand for. After all the battling with administrators they ended up saying that I wasn't going to get in trouble for this, that they didn't want me to do it, but that I was allowed to do it. And I just said that I was going to do it because I thought more positive than negative would come from it. The coaches handled it really well and were really respectful about it, and when the season arrived we just moved forward. Which was cool and I really appreciated that.

As Mark is the only participant to share a negative experience and discouragement from school administrators regarding his online story, he did discuss some of the positive reaction on campus, although minimal.

Right when the article hit, obviously my life changed a lot based on all the messages I got. I had a few teachers take me aside and offer me congratulations and say they were proud of me. And there were some random acquaintances or students on campus that told me they read the article and that they thought it was really great. But that was about it regarding any campus activity about the article.

Bobby was the only participant that shared any reaction from an opponent, receiving praise from both coaches and athletes.

Some of the other coaches in the conference emailed me and said congratulations. And, against one team, the captain came up to me after the game to tell me that he read my article and that he had a lot of respect. It was very surprising, both because it was an opponent and because he was from a religious school.

As was already discussed, the coming out process for each participant was a pivotal moment and opportunity for each participant to be able to be open and honest about themselves, which led to some compelling interactions and relationship building with their peers, some stemming from a public disclosure through an online story. Among the six participants, very few comments were shared regarding any negative experience or harassment targeted directly at them individually.

Perhaps the lack of negative experience among the participants is due to the current times in American culture at-large regarding LGBT identity and greater dialogue and acceptance of LGBT persons overall. As Bronfenbrenner's (2009) model outlines, the chronosystem, or element of time, may influence interaction and individual experience given that culture and norms may evolve, which is certainly evident by the increase in awareness and acceptance of gay identities within the male sports arena overall.

In-Team Experience

Of the negative experiences, some occurred outside athletics, as Mark shared the discouragement he received from administrators regarding his online story. Some of the negative experiences discussed were not directly tied to formal on-

campus activities, occurring in more casual social spaces such as at an off-campus party among college students. Among these experiences, participants disregarded them as insignificant due to the notion that actions or comments made jokingly or were done so by someone under the influence of alcohol. Regarding athletics specific personnel, only one participant discussed any negative interaction directly targeted at him. Karl shared the following experience with one of his coaches:

There was one coach that consistently referred to me as a [derogatory name] once they found out that I was gay. And, to put it in perspective, when I came out as gay, I also started doing a lot of advocacy work. His comments to me were not okay and I was upset by that. And, the more and more I went about doing advocacy work, the more this person tried to put hurdles up to prevent me from reaching out and helping other people that identified as LGBT and that to me was sending a strong message that maybe they weren't okay with it. That sent a strong message that maybe I did something wrong myself to make this person feel uncomfortable and then I realized too that I had done nothing wrong to make this person feel uncomfortable, they were just uncomfortable with the idea of me being gay, and to me, I was like this is exactly what kept me in the closet for a long time, was caring too much about how other people would react, what other people were thinking about. I don't want that person in my life if they aren't going to be supportive of me and I'll find a group of people that is.

As the other participants expressed that their experiences on campus had mostly been very positive regarding their interactions with teammates and coaches, any negative behaviors experienced were most often expressed by others verbally, through casual conversation and exchanges, and not directed at them personally. These primarily involved language that utilized gay terminology inappropriately. Most examples of this were similar to the following experiences shared by Bobby:

They have a summer email that invites the incoming freshmen to kind of get to know everyone before the season starts. One of the seniors wrote something like "that's so gay" about something. I didn't say anything though.

Even though he didn't speak up to correct the language coming from a teammate, he went on to share some experiences in which teammates took the initiative to correct any negative language on his behalf. When asked about sharing his gay identity with new incoming players from year to year, he shared this account.

There is a summer camp that most of the players work at. I don't usually work because I live so far away and it would cost a lot for me to get there that it really doesn't make much sense. But, usually all the current players invite the new players to hang out. There was one night that one of the new kids made a gay joke. And one of my teammates basically told him, "You know, we have a gay kid on our team so no gay jokes."

Bobby's teammate taking the initiative to help curb or discourage any of the derogatory gay language was a common theme regarding teammate and coach

behavior. Matthew experienced something similar but was hesitant to correct the behavior given that it came from an older, more senior teammate:

There was one time when one of the seniors on our team used a derogatory term, and since he was a senior, I didn't feel comfortable calling him out. Luckily for me there was another senior that saw that I was uncomfortable and he called him out for me. I'm really thankful that I have people on the team that will call people out for me or if I'm not there.

Others experienced the offender of using poor language correcting himself and apologizing after realizing what they had said in their comments.

My assistant coach, there had been a couple of times when he used the word gay in a derogatory sense, and every time, I mean it was only like 2 or 3 teams, he was like, "Oh, sorry Matt". It was offensive but not like he really meant it to be offensive.

As the negative experiences discussed were encountered through language use and most often not targeted and the individual directly, most of the participants discussed that it was their teammates and coaches that took the initiative to address the language in others, or to recognize their own behavior and apologize for it. This may indicate that the presence of an openly gay individual within their team environment may increase awareness and sensitivity of any offensive language or behavior towards their openly gay teammate, thus prompting teammates to speak out on behalf of their teammate. This idea is exemplified by Mark as he attributes his presence to changes in his teammates.

There was an overwhelming sense that they all changed their language. I mean, I think I may have heard the words “gay” or “fag” once or twice and each time that person pulled me aside and apologized for it. And that was just cool because they didn’t have to do that, but they chose to do that because of me. A bunch of them had said to me that I really changed their minds about the whole thing and made them realize that they could possibly cause hurt by using those words. I think it was cool that I opened their eyes to that stuff and made them more aware of who they could possibly hurt with whatever they’re saying.

Only one participant discussed any negative experiences from opponents while in competition, which he attributes as a catalyst for him being more competitive and playing better.

I had a couple of opposing players call me the f-word, but I don’t know if that was targeted at me or if that was something they called everyone. But both times that happened I scored, so that was fun.

Living Arrangements

Four of the participants discussed living arrangements, sharing that they had multiple teammates as roommates. For Shane and Nate, they shared housing together and with two other teammates. Nate described their living environment as follows:

There were four of us from the team that lived together. There were two hallways and us two gay guys had the two rooms on one side and the other two teammates had the two rooms on the other side. It was funny

because we would joke that there was the gay side and straight side of our apartment.

Mark referred to the house in which he lived as a team domain.

We had like the quote unquote [sport name] house that everyone would come to and hang out.

Bobby made a similar distinction to his space alongside his teammates.

We lived in the [sport name] house and the guys would always just come and hang out over there.

As living quarters can be considered a personal and often private space, as most of the participants shared that they lived exclusively with teammates, this is further indication that their teammates were primary contributors to their peer culture interactions and experience. However, living among teammates as a closeted individual can create some personal and group challenges. For Mark, the dynamics between him and his roommates changed as he privately engaged further with his identity development. He explained:

So, I lived with three other people, the four of us lived together my entire college career. We basically had an open door kind of thing. So, unless you were sleeping, everyone would just keep their door open. And the beginning of my sophomore year when I met my boyfriend, I think my door was pretty much closed all day everyday, because if I was ever talking to him, which we would do everyday, you know, I cant just have my door open doing that. So, my door was closed pretty much all of first semester. My roommates and I had clearly started to drift apart, just

because of me. It was my fault, because I was just shutting them out of everything just because I was scared. I guess it was just my own personal fear of how everyone would react. I mean it was my fault. I isolated myself from people, but things definitely weren't the same as they were freshman year. I think gradually the other three roommates just got closer, and not that I felt like they were isolating me, it was kind of equal. I mean, as much as they were kind of doing their own thing, I never made much of a huge effort to include myself. Like I said, it was just a fear of like, oh this just how it has to be because of my situation.

Although Mark began exploring his gay identity by establishing a romantic relationship with another individual, he remained silent about his identity to his on-campus peers. As he discussed, his hidden identity and relationship forced him to isolate himself and alter some of the ways in which he engaged with his roommates. In return, this created strain upon some of those peer relationships for which Mark claims responsibility. As Mark indicated that he lived with the same guys throughout the duration of his college career, these strained conditions surrounding his hidden relationship endured most of his sophomore and junior years prior to coming out entering into his last season on campus.

For Nate and Shane, as they were living together and among two other teammates at the time they learned about each other's hidden identity, this unique aspect of their peer relationship with one another provided strategic opportunities for them to further explore their identity confidentially among

each other. As shared earlier, their living quarters provided space for them to have discussions discreet discussions with one another. Additionally, having a peer and confidante experiencing the same type of development within the living space allowed for some other types of support as Nate explained:

Since we were roommates, we talked about it [being gay and possible coming out] more. And he [Shane] was a little more frivolous in his actions so I would have to make sure our roommates were asleep when he brought guys over.

For Matthew, although he did not explicitly discuss his living arrangements other than that he lived in a dormitory on campus, as the one participant that sought a liberal college environment, he shared his experience with a specific dormitory space in which he would consistently spend time.

At [school name], there is a dorm that has a gay floor for people who identify as LGBT and they have non-gendered bathrooms. During my sophomore year I went to that floor a lot socially.

This further aligns with the type of college environment and experience Matthew was trying to create for himself as an openly gay individual.

The living arrangements established by these guys appeared to be very intentional towards their peer group participation. Although they did not discuss how they decided upon their living arrangements, the fact that several of them lived exclusively among teammates indicates further that their athletics peers served a more prominent role in their lives. And for Matthew, he continued to share his journey of finding likeminded individuals and spaces in which to fit in.

Advocacy Interests and Efforts

As all of these individuals eventually achieved an openly gay on-campus identity, what also emerged was an interest in advocacy work towards awareness of LGBT identities and issues. First and foremost, five of the participants chose to share their personal experiences as an openly gay student-athlete publicly through an online story. These stories also included a contact email for them, inviting people who may have read their story to connect with them further. Sharing their story online may be considered an act of advocacy by being a public and accessible example for other student-athletes that may be dealing with sexual orientation identity issues.

As mentioned earlier, Bobby engaged in advocacy work as an active member of his high school's GSA. Upon arriving to college, he sought out the school's local GSA but initially limited his participation due to athletics responsibilities. When he did engage with the GSA, he grew frustrated due to their lack of outreach as the group was mostly focused upon provided a safe space for people to visit and hang out. As he didn't explicitly discuss specific outreach efforts, he did discuss that any outreach he was involved in was an extension of his own efforts and not that of any established on-campus LGBT resource group or center.

I don't think I had the expectation to be super involved. I have gone to the GSA before. I have done some activism on campus. I know that community somewhat well.

Other participants mentioned their engagement with the non-profit organizations Athlete Ally and GO! Athletes, one of them explicitly sharing how an

associate with one of these organizations provided direct support in leading him to write and share his story online, as well as come out on campus. For those that engaged with Athlete Ally, it was through the organization's campus ambassador program through which their advocacy interests were explored. Athlete Ally's campus ambassador program enlists openly LGBT and ally student-athletes from colleges across the country as ambassadors of the organization and their school. One opportunity with this program is the creation of an on-campus Athlete Ally chapter, of which is focused on building a cohort of ambassadors and programming efforts specific to a campus. Three of the participants shared their Athlete Ally interests and experience as relevant to their campus.

For Nate, being a senior and coming out late in his career, he shared his interest in starting an Athlete Ally chapter on his campus and discussed some of the obstacles he faced

Me and some friends, we tried to get Athlete Ally started here. That was a couple of weeks before finals started and we hardly got any interest. And so, that kind of got swept under the rug when finals started. We are trying to hand it off to some underclassmen because me and the two others that are trying to start it are all graduating, and so we are trying to find someone who can take the reigns for next year. We were too late in the game to start gathering interest.

It appears that Nate had strong interest and good intentions to help create and promote some advocacy work specific to student-athlete LGBT and ally identities on

campus, yet the timing late in his career posed as an obstacle to establish a chapter prior to his departure from the school.

For Karl, he helped to successfully establish an Athlete Ally chapter on his campus. He was very instrumental in working with the organization and his school to establish an Athlete Ally presence and grow visibility around campus. He expressed how the support he received was the catalyst for his advocacy efforts.

Going into junior year, when I realized what a great support system I had from my teammates, my family and my friends, I realized how fortunate I was that I needed to do something to help other people that were struggling with their sexual orientation or gender identity to have an outlet where they could have that support system too. That led to me to start a chapter of Athlete Ally here at [school name] to ensure that they had that, especially the student athletes.

As for Matthew, his involvement with Athlete Ally started as a result of a chapter already being established on his campus. He explains how get got involved and one of the advocacy opportunities in which he participated.

When this Athlete Ally group started on campus they reached out to all the teams and emailed everybody and so I joined. I think the one thing that really put them in the spotlight was when the Westboro Baptist church came to campus to protest. The [school name] organized a counter-protest rally, which I spoke at in front of 600 people or so. And I emailed my team and just told them that you guys have been really supportive and I'd love it if you came to this event to kind of show why it's

a big deal that we are doing this, and show everybody on campus that athletics supports this too.

These interests and efforts among these three examples represent a very specific student-athlete and athletics focus. This may indicate and further support the high priority they place upon their identification as an athlete, as well as exemplify the importance of LGBT resources that focus upon athletics culture first as opposed to the collective campus population.

As most of the participants shared specific and larger-scale interests and efforts of advocacy, Shane shared his recognition of a more subtle and generalized level of advocacy related to promoting better language use. When asked if he had recognized any changes in his own behavior since coming out, he explained:

Combatting gay talk in general. I was never someone who used a word like “faggot” or “gay” in my regular conversation, certainly a lot of my buddies on my team do. And, I guess I always knew all along that when they use those words they didn’t mean it in a harmful way. But, certainly the language, my language has changed. Or, I’m just more careful or more sensitive about those things. I do owe it to people in the future to help them because I feel I could be a great resource.

Whatever their level of interest or engagement with advocacy, the universal theme across all participants is that advocacy towards LGBT issues, at some level, is part of their thought process as an openly gay male. Whether through sharing a public online story, creating an on-campus resource effort, participating in protests, or combatting inappropriate language, each participant discussed their interests

and engagement in this area. This may suggest that, as they all successfully achieved an openly gay identity on campus, future advocacy efforts may represent their recognition of a need for more support outlets, or may be in response for support they received throughout their own journey.

Individual Attributes for Positive Experience

Towards the conclusion of each interview, upon my learning about each individual's identity development experience, one final question was asked of each participant related to attributes they feel need to be in place in order to successfully navigate the identity development process as an openly gay male student-athlete. The purpose of the question was to provide opportunity for them to reflect back upon their experiences, as well as offer their thoughts as it pertained to their success in achieving an open identity on their campus and among their peers. Participant responses ranged across both personal and environmental attributes. The following represents each participant's answers and are listed by individual for purposes of capturing their full response to this question:

Mark

Its obvious that a school like mine is difficult to be at. But I, more than anyone, have realized that your environment really doesn't matter as long as you have a support system with you. Finding those people and opening up to the right people, it's about not expecting the worst in people and not underestimating people. Because, a lot of people I assumed wouldn't be okay with it and would be negative about it or not welcoming were very much the opposite. If you believe in yourself and accept yourself, and you have a group of family or friends, I don't care how big it is or how small it

is, if you have a support system with you, the environment really is secondary to that, you know, as long as you are not being physically or mentally harmed by your environment. I guess they go by the phrase at my school that "Ignorance is bliss", which seems like they just care not to know and not talk about it. But, in my case, in terms of an environment situation, if anything, that just motivated me to be myself even more. The environment can have an effect, even if it is a negative one it can be positive. I have told people that I don't think that I would even be close to the person I am today without going to [school name]. If I would have come out and it would have been super easy and everything would have been smooth, who knows how it would be today. I think every little bit matters.

Karl

First and foremost, from my standpoint of being a student-athlete, that has led to me having a successful and enjoyable experience, is you have to first find a way to be happy with who you are and worry about yourself and not so much what others think of you in terms of your sexual orientation. And I feel you need to gain the confidence within yourself and find a way to have self-acceptance. Otherwise, you won't enjoy your experience on the athletic field and you won't be able to have your best performances. I felt, after I came out, my performances increased greatly and my contributions to the team increased greatly just because I was so much more comfortable with who I was. Two, you need to kind of walk around with that chip on your shoulder. You need to be cognizant and

aware of your surroundings and your environment because there are times where you might be confident in who you are, but you have to be cognizant of that maybe there are people around you that aren't as uncomfortable with it. But, you need be able to find way to strike a balance. You really need to be understanding because, just like its journey for you to accept yourself, it is going to be a journey for friends and teammates in your life to come to terms with being an ally. And if they make mistakes at the beginning, don't take it personally. See it as they're trying to learn. For a lot of people, at least in athletics, it might be the first time that they're having to find a way to be a good ally for a gay teammate. I'm sure some may have met or interacted with LGBT people, but this is the first time where someone they have to spend 40 hours a week with, hang out with more and go dinner and travel with. This is an important relationship for them. Sometimes they don't know how to react and they're trying to figure it out so just be respectful and understanding and they'll find a way. And if the relationship is important to you you'll take the time to figure out a way that works for both of you. And three, if you think about it early on in your journey and if you want to play sports and you think you might be gay, do a little research into what the climate is like.

Bobby

I think part is that the program as a whole needs to respect you, as a person and as a player. You need to earn that respect. As an individual,

you need to give other people the space that they need to digest it. Because I've seen a lot of times people tell people and they don't receive the perfect response right away. If it's the first time they've interacted with a gay person, they'll need a second to get used to it. And usually they try. Usually it's an active process. They're trying to get acclimated to getting use to being around a gay teammate. "Don't force it down their throat" is usually what I say. You give them the time that they need and then they get used to it. It makes it a lot easier on both sides and they usually appreciate you giving them the time that they need and you appreciate them for putting in the effort. This sounds bad but I think a certain level of average intelligence is needed too. I think someone that can actually think critically about what they had thought before and what they think now. So, if they have a certain prejudice they can actually think critically about it and be like, "Oh. Why did I think that? No reason. This dude seems pretty cool. I'll get to know him anyway" versus someone who doesn't have that thought process.

Shane

Knowing that someone cares about you or having a really close bond with your teammates. [Sport name] literally never ends so you're always around these guys and you're automatically going to become close with these guys and you know they care. So, I guess knowing that you have people who really care about you as a person and not just an athlete is super important. You know, I told them because they are my close friends

and I knew they deserved me telling them straight forward. I think there needs to be a really confidential part or someone you could reach out to who could put you in touch with others who are in a similar situation would be helpful moving into the future, but you just got to know when the timing is right. For me, it was having the support of friends. That was huge for me.

Nate

First and foremost, you have to have self-acceptance. It took so long for me to say out loud "I am gay". Those words just sounded so bazaar to me. You have to be completely comfortable and accepting of yourself before coming out or else, I don't know, you're treading too lightly for the rest of your life or maybe just living in the half-closet in some aspects of your life.

Matthew

I don't think my experience is very representative of a lot of guys that might be going through this. From my experience, I really feel like it was from my attitude of that this is the way it is going to be. I just took the time to be open and openly talked about it, you know, from the standpoint of just assuming it is all normal. With the guys, they see me doing that and I think they just think that's the way it is going to be. I was very lucky because I was able to separate coming out with creating this accepting environment at college. I think having to do that at the same time is really hard. Because I was open about my identity and then I was able to come to college, I think that helped.

Throughout their responses to this final question, the participants shared what they each felt was critical to their success in achieving an openly gay identity on campus. As some discussed the importance of fully accepting who you are individually, some expressed the critical nature of having a support system in place, of which they identified mostly in teammates on campus. In developing that support system, some participants discussed the importance of allowing time for teammates to digest and deal with a teammate coming out and by allowing that, those peer relationships and the overall experience will benefit in the end. These comments and attributes identified by participants represent factors associated with the earlier outlined identity models of Chickering (1969) and D'Augelli (1994). From self-acceptance and the presence of positive personal subjectivities about their gay identity, to the presence of influential, positive and accepting interactions, these participants' experiences are good examples of those frameworks in action.

Summary of the Findings

Results of this study represent the experiences and perceptions of six openly gay males participating in varsity athletics at the intercollegiate level. The discussions with each participant reveal critical insight towards their interactions on campus and their perceptions of their surrounding on-campus peer constructs. From selecting their school, to coming out, to interacting with teammates, to developing an interest in advocacy work, these six athletes each represent a journey positively influenced by the environment around them. This supports literature that suggests that homophobia in sport is decreasing

and homosexuality is more broadly accepted in sport, thus offering space and opportunity for gay athletes to participate openly (Serra, 2013; Adams, 2011; Anderson, 2011; Cavalier, 2011). Table 3 represents a brief summary of the major themes that emerged through the analysis of the data.

The Individual and Their Campus	Coming Out on Campus	Interactions with Campus Personnel	Advocacy Interests & Efforts	Individual Attributes for Positive Experience
Participant Profiles	Teammates	Athletics vs. Non-Athletics Personnel	Writing Their Story	Self-Acceptance
Choosing Their School	Coaches	Online Story Reactions	On-Campus Efforts	Self-Confidence
Individual Identity	Accommodation of Others	In-Team Experience	Localized Efforts	Support System
		Living Arrangements		

Table 3. Summary of Major Themes

For all athletes, whether out or in the closet before entering college, a coming out process occurred. Two athletes identified as out prior to college, yet discussed that they still had to come out and disclose their gay identity to their teammates and coaches. For both of them this happened less informally during casual conversation, or through normalizing (Cunningham, 2011; Clair et al, 2005) as compared to the other four athletes who experienced a more deliberate and methodical coming out approach. For all athletes, it was to team personnel (mostly teammates) that they came out to first on campus. This is in contrast to some literature that claim most gay male athletes do not come out to their teammates (Serra, 2013; Campbell, Cothren, Rogers, Kistler, Osowski, Greenauer, & End, 2011), that the perception of sport as hostile is what keeps most gay male athletes in the closet (Serra, 2013; Anderson, 2011), or that the risk involved with coming out may be too great (Serra, 2013;

Cavalier, 2011). For the participants in this study, not only did they come out successfully and report positive experiences with teammates and coaches, each of them also discussed their significant role as either a captain, starter, or major contributor towards their team's success. As the literature suggests that the ability to compete and contribute, accompanied by high athletic prowess leads to greater acceptance (Ehrmann et al, 2011; Bierman, 2004), the participants experienced this within their own settings. One athlete reported earning post-season accolades and awards, while multiple athletes shared that their engagement and enjoyment with their sport increased once they came out, which supports the work of Cunningham (2011) regarding positive outcomes within sport environments that exemplify sexual orientation diversity and inclusive practice.

Regarding their engagement with their surrounding environment, as literature suggests that peer groups and friendships are developed among those that share similar interests and activities (Bierman, 2004), this very much is represented by these athletes. Not only did most of them discuss that the majority of their on-campus friends are also teammates, several of them lived with their teammates as well. And for Matthew, as he sought a specific type of college culture, he also discussed the need to find a place to fit it, which included his engagement with a dormitory floor designated for LGBT students.

Given that some participants seemingly made accommodations for their teammates and coaches during the coming out process, accommodations that required participants to be more meticulous and account for other's comfort,

this may indicate that although acceptance of a gay teammate may be present, the heterosexist nature of sport is still prevalent. Cunningham (2011) indicates that heterosexism “privileges heterosexuality” (p. 217), which is exemplified here as participants, when reaching a decision to disclose or reveal a very personal and private identity appear overly concerned with the feelings and condition of their heterosexual counterparts and their ability to receive this information. Furthermore, this may indicate that a lack of accommodation on the part of the participant may have led to negative interactions or responses.

As their identities developed, little engagement occurred with any on-campus LGBT resources or support outlets. It was the two athletes that were out prior to college, Bobby and Matthew, who indicated any type of experience with a campus LGBT resource center. However, these experiences were minimal and may have been initiated because of their LGBT outreach and activities prior to college. For some, connecting with a campus resource conflicted did not occur as it conflicted with their identity as an athlete.

One theme that connected with all participants was their interest and efforts in advocacy work. This is in contrast to their interest in engaging with efforts on campus that were more universal to the entire campus population. Advocacy efforts among these participants appeared to extend from their athlete identity and seemed to be focused towards supporting individuals within an athletics culture. As five of the six participants shared their experiences as an openly gay student-athlete through an online story, some

saw opportunities to engage with efforts involving outreach made by national organizations towards college athletes. Some athletes localized their advocacy interests to support specific on campus events or promoting improved behaviors and language among teammates. The emergence of advocacy interests may stem directly from each participant's recognition of the need for an increase in support specifically with an athletics-grounded foundation. Additionally, this advancement towards advocacy may be an example of the progression that their gay identity eventually progressed to a synthesis (Fassinger, 1998; Cass, 1979) of which allows them to reveal and incorporate this part of themselves into every aspect of their life.

Participants offered their thoughts regarding attributes they feel are necessary for an individual to successfully navigate their college experience as a gay student-athlete. Attributes discussed represented personal attributes such as self-awareness and self-acceptances, as well environmental attributes such as having a support system in place. These attributes connect to literature regarding college student identity development theory. Specifically, developing competency in self, identity and relationships represent both Chickering's (1969) and D'Augelli's (1994) framework. As well, the sociohistorical aspect discussed by D'Augelli, also represented by Bronfenbrenner's (2009) chronosystem, may be exemplified in the overall experiences of these participants with their surrounding environments. The notion that, over time, sport has gradually become increasingly more accepting of gay athletes may very well be a primary reason why all these participants

were able to come out as gay, continue to successfully participate and contribute in their sport, and share a positive experience in the end.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to conduct a qualitative investigation with gay male student-athletes to understand their experiences and perceptions as influenced by peer culture factors. The results from this study provide insight into the subject of gay student-athletes by focusing upon individual experience with their surrounding on-campus peer culture and environment. Through this qualitative analysis, multiple themes emerged that have not been thoroughly identified and explored in previous literature. These themes identify both the intrapersonal struggles that gay student-athletes may go through prior to disclosing their sexual orientation, as well as pinpoint ways in which all athletes can be better supported in the context of sport regardless of their sexual identity. The following discussion seeks to first expand on the present study's findings and integrate them within the context of the relevant literature. Next, the study's contributions to the literature and implications of the findings for sport are delineated. Finally, the study's limitations are discussed along with recommendations for future research.

One of the main contributions this study adds to the extant literature includes the examination of the coming out process and that student-athletes can come out as gay to teammates and coaches, incorporate their gay identity into their experience, and still successfully participate and contribute in a meaningful way towards their individual and team's success. As Gough (2007) reported in his study examining coming out as part of the sport experience among gay male athletes, this process and experience is defined as "difficult but rewarding" (p. 163). Gough

conducted a discourse analysis of online stories shared by openly gay male athletes. However, unlike this study, interviews with the athletes were not part of the methods used to collect data for analysis. Gough's findings are among the first to suggest that athletes are able to come out within sport, among their teams, and still participate. However, contrary to most experiences among participants in this current study, in which athletes were out and their gay identity remained prevalent throughout their campus experiences among their peers, Gough shared within his analysis and discussion that his participants' open identities were tolerated but silenced. Also, regarding the coming out process among participants in this current study, it was uncovered that participants first told team personnel and there was a cognizance and concern for their teammates and coaches reception and reaction of their identity disclosure. Therefore, tactful and strategic measures were used out of respect for these individuals.

Also not represented in previous literature is the examination of athlete interest in advocacy work. These interests emerged in lieu of participant interest in engaging with more universal campus LGBT outreach and support efforts. This may be a result of their prioritized identification as an athlete more than as a gay individual. It is important to note that this finding may not be true for all gay athletes. As the sample size in this study was small and only represented openly gay athletes, it is important to consider that not all gay athletes may develop an interest in advocacy efforts, which could also make it more difficult for some individuals in the closet to come out openly within the context of sport. Additionally, most of these participants were identified through an online story, considered by this study

as a form of advocacy in sharing their identity as an openly gay student-athlete. Therefore, advocacy was already part of their experience at some level leading into the interviews, with several participants then discussing advanced on-campus advocacy efforts through various additional opportunities.

A third area not explicit to previous research is the perspective of gay athletes regarding attributes needed in order to create a successful experience towards achieving an out identity while actively participating as a college-level student-athlete. Both individual and environment attributes were identified among participants in this study. For example, some participants discussed that having self-acceptance and self-confidence in your identity is critical to positive experience, while others shared that having a support system in place is a key factor. These attributes identified by participants connect to the previously discussed student identity development framework of both Chickering (1969) and D'Augelli (1994) and involving their discussions of key factors that influence identity formation. This current investigation makes contributions to these frameworks by examining the athletics peer culture system that surrounds male student-athletes in consideration of the traditional masculine and homophobic norms associated with sport participation, which may increase the difficulty or present unique challenges towards achieving an out identity realization for a gay individual.

Regarding their environments in general, the two participants that described their campus culture as conservative were the only two individuals to discuss any negative experience within their athletics department. However, it was not fully determined to what extent, if at all, these conservative perceptions were influenced

by these negative experiences. Furthermore, for those individuals that reported a liberal campus culture, it was also not discussed or determined whether these perceptions, if at all, were influenced by their positive experiences as an openly gay athlete.

Limitations

In order to advance the inquiry process and further grow the collective literature base focused upon gay male athlete experience, it is imperative that limitations of this current study are identified and discussed. First, the uniqueness of the sample of self-identified openly gay male athletes participating in competitive intercollegiate athletics, many who had previously shared their personal stories publicly, is not representative of the entire population of gay college male student-athletes. As each of the participants emphasized the positive experiences and outcomes across their respective journeys, as discussed in this study, it is assumed that only individuals that follow similar trajectories will report similar experiences.

Another limitation is the size of the sample. As is salient with most studies involving gay male athletes, it is difficult to identify openly gay male athletes for participation. Therefore, this study utilized online resources to recruit an initial pool of participant invitations. As several individuals were invited, a very small percentage of those invitations were accepted. Additional participants were considered through snowball sampling, which resulted in the final six participants. With a limited sample size, it is therefore difficult to generalize findings to the entire population.

As participants represented a variety of schools and locations around the country, not all regions of the country or all types and sizes of schools were represented presenting another limitation to the study. Furthermore, all of these individuals identified as openly gay and out to their teammates and coaches, lending to the assumption that their experiences must have been positive given that they successfully came out and were still participating in their sport and attending their respective schools. As a result, very few negative experiences were reported. Nor were there any closeted participants to discuss any challenges preventing them from coming out.

Perhaps an additional limitation of this study is that no individuals representing the participants' peer culture systems were interviewed regarding their interactions with an openly gay team member. Interviews with these individuals may have provided some additional insight and validation of the surrounding peer culture and the level of support it provided for each individual.

Future Directions

Through the semi-structured discussions with participants and analyzing their responses as they pertained to the study's research questions, several ideas emerged in consideration of future directions for empirical inquiry focused upon this population. First, when considering teammate peer culture, it will be important to continue advancing beyond researching attitudes towards LGBT participants and transition to a focus that explores and discusses individual's actual understanding of LGBT issues and experiences. Such a focus may lend to enabling peers to adopt a more empathic perspective towards LGBT athletes if they are able to understand the

challenges associated with sexual orientation identity development. As previous literature suggests, connections to LGBT individuals often equated to more positive attitudes towards those individuals (Roper & Halloran, 2007). Ultimately, they may be more responsive and sensitive with regard to their own behaviors and thus help create an environment that is supportive and inclusive.

Additionally, assessing attitudes about LGBT individuals often also includes perceptions of environments, which do not always represent the actual climate or culture, whether positive or negative. As Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker and Robinson-Keilig (2004) discussed in their study focused on perceptions of campus climate for LGBT students, LGBT students reported a more negative perception than those representing other campus student groups. Similar to the Campus Pride (2012) college athlete report, LGBQ individuals reported lower scores regarding perceptions of both climate and respect than their heterosexual counterparts. As these two studies were quantitative in nature and discussed large survey data sets, there is little to no identification or discussion of factors within environments that influenced the reported levels of negative perception among participants. It is important for future research to further explore campus athletics environments from the position of actual climate as experienced by the individual developing a gay identity as compared with the perception of those that are not in order to create a broader picture for discussion that will hopefully narrow the gap involving any difference between the two. For example, perceptions may assume an environment is inclusive simply because that environment has not experienced any negative incidents, which can be dangerous. As a developing gay identity is unknown until

that individual openly discloses that part of himself to others, it is important that an environment build respect and inclusion through training and education among personnel in order to outwardly promote a safe environment for positive identity development to occur. Indeed, many sport environments may serve as a positive and supportive climate for certain athletes and a negative and unsupportive climate for other athletes, such as LGBT individuals. Future qualitative research that examines potential moderators of athlete's perceptions of the climate of sport environment will help provide a clearer picture of the perceptions among both gay athletes and their peers regarding the microsystem in which they are embedded.

Second, to extend this inquiry involving individual experience and peer culture interaction, it will be important to examine additional perspectives differing from those of openly gay student-athletes such as the participants in this study. If participants can be identified, it will be important to examine peer culture interactions of closeted individuals in order to learn of any obstacles and influences that may be preventing them from achieving an openly gay identity on campus. Additionally, regarding out athletes, the perspectives of their peers may be important to explore in order to gain their insight and add depth to the discussion involving their openly gay teammates.

Next, as college campuses offer LGBT resources that serve the entire campus population, it is important to explicitly explore the gap between these resource centers and their connection to athletics departments and personnel. If a resource center is on campus to serve the entire population, it will be important to identify if these centers are considering athletics culture and the unique aspects of gay identity

within the environment, and how they are approaching an athletics culture that may feel a disassociation with them.

Lastly, future research should investigate athletic department climate regarding policy associated with inclusion and programs involving LGBT issues in sport. Regarding college athletics specifically, the NCAA recently released a comprehensive document titled “Champions of Respect’, which outlines a range of issues that may be experienced within an athletics department and their LGBT constituents. This represents an important line of inquiry because the implementation of this resource as an extension of the largest governing body of intercollegiate athletics participation in the country is unknown. As it stands, it is unclear whether or not administrators, coaches and athletes are aware of it, and if it is actually being utilized to create safer environments for LGBT participants.

Conclusion

The participant responses highlighted in this study represent their individual experiences and perceptions of their surrounding on-campus environments and interactions, which may suggest support towards the discussion that sport culture is trending positively towards greater inclusion of openly gay athletes. However, it is important for sport culture to increasingly promote inclusion and acceptance in order to improve even the most resistant and conservative locations and environments. As more athletes continue to share their identities publicly, this significantly contributes to increasing the examples and resources available to those that may be dealing with sexual orientation identity issues as an athlete. Similar to Derrick Gordon and Michael Sam, the participants in this study each were able to

come out openly to their teams and continue to participate successfully as a member of their team.

As more and more young people are choosing to disclose their identities as gay or lesbian at younger ages, it is important for them to also learn of the positive experiences of those that participate in sport. As two of the participants identified as gay prior to entering in college, they represent this trend and furthermore represent that their can be a successful transition to college as a student-athlete. As research indicates that young people are avoiding athletic types of activities due to their perceptions of sport being hostile and unaccepting, these types of positive examples are important in order to encourage them to engage in activities that will contribute to their overall individual wellness.

It is the hope of this author that inquiry in this area will continue to represent positive gains for LGBT individuals in sport. In conclusion, the collection and visibility of openly gay athletes will increase as long as we continue to educate and empower the peer cultures that surround them to develop an inclusive and respectful mindset. With increased access to gay athletes, researchers will be in a better position to conduct ethical research that focuses on better understanding their experiences, which will therefore contribute to informing the practice of creating more responsive and supportive sport environments for all individuals.

RESOURCES

- Adams, A. (2011). Josh wears pink cleats: Inclusive masculinity on the soccer field. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 58, 579-596.
- Anderson, E. (2002). Openly gay athletes: Contesting hegemonic masculinity in a homophobic environment. *Gender & Society*. Vol. 16, No. 6, December 2002. 860-877.
- Anderson, E. (2005). *In the game: Gay athletes and the cult of masculinity*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Anderson, E. (2009). *Inclusive masculinity: The changing nature of masculinities*. New York: Routledge.
- Anderson, E. (2011). Masculinities and sexualities in sport and physical cultures: Three decades of evolving research. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 58, 565-578.
- Anderson, E. (2012). The changing relationship between men's homosexuality and sport. In G. B. Cunningham (Ed.), *Sexual orientation and gender in sport: Essays from activists, coaches, and scholars* (pp. 35-45). College Station, TX: Center for Sport Management Research and Education.
- Athlete Ally (N.D.). *Who is an athlete ally?* Retrieved from:
<http://www.athleteally.org/about/>
- Barriball, K.L. & While, A. (1994). Collecting data using a semi-structured interview: a discussion paper. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 19(2), 328-335.
- Berg, B. L., & Lune, H. (2004). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (8th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Bierman, K. L. (2004). *Peer rejection: Developmental processes and intervention*

- strategies*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1993). The ecology of cognitive development: Research models and fugitive findings. In R.H. Wozniak & K.W. Fischer (Eds.), *Development in context: Acting and thinking in specific environments* (pp. 3-44). Mahwah: Erlbaum.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (2009). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard university press.
- Brown, R.D., Clarke, B., Gortmaker, V. & Robinson-Keilig, R. (2004). Assessing the campus climate for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) students using a multiple perspectives approach. *Journal of College Student Development*, 45(1), 8-26.
- Campbell, J., Cothren, D., Rogers, R., Kistler, L., Osowski, A., Greenauer, N. & End, C. (2011). Sports fans' impressions of gay male athletes. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 58, 597-607.
- Campus Pride, (2012). *LGBTQ National College Athlete Report*. Charlotte, NC.
- Cavalier, E.S. (2011). Men at sport: Gay men's experiences in the sport workplace. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 58, 626-646.
- Carodine, K., Almond, K. A., & Gratto, K.K. (2001). College student athlete success both in and out of the classroom. *New directions for student services: Student services for athletes*, 93, 35-45.
- Carson, D., Gilmore, A., Perry, C., & Gronhaug, K. (2001). *Qualitative marketing research*. Sage.
- Chickering, A. W. (1969). *Education and identity*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

- Chickering, A. W. and Reisser, L. (1993). *Education and identity* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Clair, J. A., Beatty, J. E., & MacLean, T. L. (2005). Out of sight but not out of mind: Managing invisible social identities in the workplace. *Academy of Management Review, 30*, 78-95.
- Coakley, J. (2004). *Sport in society: Issues and controversies*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Connelly, C. (2014). *Mizzou's Michael Sam says he's gay*. Retrieved from:
http://espn.go.com/espn/otl/story/_/id/10429030/michael-sam-missouri-tigers-says-gay
- Corbin, J. & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Creed, W. E. D. (2006). Seven conversations about the same thing: Homophobia and heterosexism in the workplace. In A. M. Konrad, P. Prasad, & J. K. Pringle (Eds.), *Handbook of workplace diversity* (pp. 371-400). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Creswell, J. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Cunningham, G. B. (2011). *Diversity in sports organizations*. Scottsdale: Holcomb Hathaway.
- Cunningham, G. B. (2012). Bridging the gap: Researchers and activist pursuing LGBT equality in sport. In G. B. Cunningham (Ed.), *Sexual orientation and gender identity in sport: Essays from activists, coaches, and scholars* (pp. 69-77). College Station, TX: Center for Sport Management Research and Education.
- D'Augelli, A.R. (1994). Identity development and sexual orientation: Toward a model

- of lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity development. In E. J. Trickett, R. J. Watts, & D. Birman (Eds.), *Human diversity: Perspectives on people in context* (pp. 312-333). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ehrmann, J., Ehrmann, P., & Jordan, G. (2011). *InSideOut coaching: How sports can transform lives*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Evans, N.J., Forney, D.S., Guido, F.M., Patton, L.D., and Renn, K.A. (2010). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Glesne, C. (2011). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. Boston: Pearson/Allyn & Bacon.
- Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network. (2013). The experiences of LGBT students in school athletics. Retrieved from: http://www.glsen.org/binary-data/GLSEN_ATTACHMENTS/file/000/002/2140-1.pdf
- Geertz, C. (1973). Thick Description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture. *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 311-323.
- Griffin, P. (2012). LGBT equality in sports: Celebrating our successes and facing our challenges. In G. B. Cunningham (Ed.), *Sexual orientation and gender identity in sport: Essays from activists, coaches, and scholars* (pp. 1-12). College Station, TX: Center for Sport Management Research and Education.
- Gough, B. (2007). Coming out in the heterosexist world of sport: A qualitative analysis of web postings by gay athletes. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Psychotherapy*, 11, 153-174.
- Harris, F. (2010). College men's meanings of masculinities and contextual influences:

- Toward a conceptual model. *Journal of College Student Development*, 51, 297-318.
- Herek, G. M. (2000). The psychology of sexual prejudice. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 9, 19-22.
- Howard-Hamilton, M. F. & Sina, J.A. (2001) How college affects student athletes. *New directions for student services: Student services for athletes*, 93, 19-33.
- Hudson, L. A. & Ozanne, J. L. (1988). Alternative ways of seeking knowledge in consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 14, (508-521).
- Kopay, D., & Young, P. D. (1977). *The David Kopay story: An extraordinary self-revelation*. New York: Arbor House.
- Kimmel, M. (2008). *Guyland: The perilous world where boys become men*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Kuh, G. (1995). Cultivating “high-stakes” student culture research. *Research in Higher Education*, 36(5), 563-576.
- Lichtman, M. (2006). *Qualitative research in education: A user’s guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Lincoln, Y. & Guba, E. (1985). *Effective evaluation: improving the usefulness of evaluation results through responses and naturalistic approaches*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Markula, P. & Silk, M. (2011). *Qualitative research for physical culture*. New York: Macmillan.
- McLellan, G. S., King, C., & Rockey, Jr., D. L., (2012). *The handbook of college athletics and recreation administration*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- McMillan, J.H. (2012). *Education research: Fundamentals for the consumer*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Merriam, S.B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Messner, M. (1992). *Power at play: Sports and the problem of masculinity*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Meyer, I. H. (2003). Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence. *Psychological Bulletin*, 129, 674-697.
- National Collegiate Athletics Association. (N.D.) Retrieved from:
<http://www.ncaa.org/wps/wcm/connect/public/ncaa/about+the+ncaa#sthash.FMB0XjBb.dpbs>
- National Collegiate Athletics Association. (2012). *Champions of respect*. Retrieved from:
<http://www.ncaapublications.com/p-4305-champions-of-respect-inclusion-of-lgbtq-student-athletes-and-staff-in-ncaa-programs.aspx>
- Ortlipp, M. (2008). Keeping and using reflective journals in the qualitative research process. *The Qualitative Report*, 13(4), 695-705.
- Patton, M.Q. (2003). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ponterotto, J. G. (2005). Qualitative research in counseling psychology: A primer on research paradigms and philosophy of science. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52(2), 126.
- Pronger, B. (1990). *The arena of masculinity: Sports, homosexuality, and the meaning of*

- sex*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Renn, K.A. & Arnold, K.D. (2003). Reconceptualizing research on college student peer culture. *Journal of Higher Education*, 74, 261-291.
- Roper, E. A. & Halloran, E. (2007). Attitudes toward gay men and lesbians among heterosexual male and female student-athletes. *Sex roles: A journal of research*, 57, 919-928.
- Sartore, M. L. (2007). *An exploration of the lesbian label among health and kinesiology department academicians*. (Order No. 3281148, Texas A&M University). *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, 167. Retrieved from: <http://search.proquest.com/docview/304730396?accountid=14784>
- Schatzman, L. & Strauss, A. (1973). *Field Research: Strategies for a Natural Sociology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Schwandt, T. A. (2007). *The SAGE dictionary of qualitative inquiry*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- Sellitz C., Jahoda, Deutsch, M., & Cook, S.W. (1967). *Research Methods in Social Relations* (2nd ed.). New York: Hold, Rinehart & Winston.
- Serra, D. (2013). Singled out: A narrative exploration into sexuality, sport, and masculinity. (Unpublished master's thesis). Bowling Green State University.
- Southall, R. M., Nagel, M. S., Anderson, E. D., Polite, F. G., & Southall, C. (2009). An investigation of college male athletes' attitudes towards sexual-orientation. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, Special Issue, 62-77.
- Torres, V., Howard-Hamilton, M.F., and Cooper, D.L. (2003). *Identity Development of*

Diverse Populations: Implications for Teaching and Administration in Higher Education. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Watt, S. K. & Moore, III, J. L. (2001). Who are student athletes? *New directions for student services: Student services for athletes*, 93, 7-18.

Weinberg, G. (1972). *Society and the healthy homosexual.* New York: St. Martin

Ziegler, C. (2014). *Derrick Gordon finds his freedom.* Retrieved from:

<http://www.outsports.com/2014/4/9/5582758/derrick-gordon-comes-out-umass-basketball>

Appendix A
Participant Recruitment Invitation

University of Washington
College of Education, Box 353600
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Seattle, Washington 98195-3600
Phone:(206) 685-6356

May 4, 2014

Dear Student-Athlete,

I am writing to ask you to participate in a study regarding experience as an openly gay college male student-athlete. I am interested in learning more about individual experiences specific to interaction with the surrounding on-campus academic and athletic peer culture systems, and to identify what variables within these peer culture systems contribute to these experiences being positive or negative. You are being contacted as this phase of the research plan is intentional as follow-up to an online public story or interview representing your identity and experience as an openly gay college male student-athlete, and in response to the email address offered to connect with you for further information. I am undertaking this study as part of doctoral studies at the University of Washington and as part of research with the College of Education's Leadership and Policy Studies program.

In this study I hope to interview intercollegiate student-athletes identified via publically accessible stories or articles found on various online media sources to gain more insight and understanding of their individual experiences in extension of what is presented in those online accounts. I hope the results of this study will inform our understanding of gay college male student-athletes experience on campus. This information may eventually assist in the future development of programs or policy purposeful in supporting gay student-athletes and inclusive environments surrounding college athletics efforts.

If you choose to be in this study, I would like to interview you at least once about your experience as an openly gay college male student-athlete in support and clarification of what the text within your respective public online story represents. The primary interview will last approximately 60 minutes and will focus on your experiences as an openly gay college male student-athlete as influenced by your interactions with members of your surrounding academic and athletic peer culture systems. For example, I will ask you, "When you think about your experiences as an openly gay college male student-athlete, what comes to mind?" and "In what ways did participating in your particular sport contribute to your experience as an openly gay college male student-athlete?" and "How would you describe the academic and athletic peer culture systems in which you participate on your campus?" Any subsequent interview questions will build upon these themes and may include questions prompted by my conversations with other student-athletes.

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You can stop at any time. If the results of this study are published or presented, I will not use your name or any other information that would identify you, your team, or your institution. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Washington Human Subjects Division: 206-543-0098.

Thank you for considering this opportunity. Should you have any questions or concerns, please contact me by phone at (425) 501-5455 or email at mbryant7@u.washington.edu.

Yours sincerely,

Mike Bryant
Doctoral Candidate
Education Leadership and Policy Studies, College of Education

Appendix B
Interview Protocol

Introduction:

My broad area of interest is experience of the gay college male student-athlete in relation to their surrounding academic and athletic peer culture systems. I am interviewing several student-athletes that have previously shared their personal story publicly through an online website source and who all have provided contact information. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of each individual's overall college experience as an openly gay male student-athlete as an extension of their experiences shared publicly online, and to identify what factors and/or interactions within the individual's academic and athletic peer culture systems contributed to positive and negative experiences.

As you may be well aware, among males, sport participation has traditionally been a key indicator of peer acceptance and a primary source of peer interaction. Additionally, the culture of sport for males traditionally incorporates homophobic attitudes and behaviors, thus marginalizing any individual disclosing a gay identity. As sport and society has experienced a positive shift in cultural awareness and acceptance of LGBT identities in general, one area in which this is evident is in the growing number of online public stories or personal accounts of openly gay college male student-athletes. My hope is to learn more about what micro-level factors within the peer culture systems influenced positive and/or negative experiences. The following is a list of potential questions that may be asked as part of the semi-structured interview process for this study:

1. From reading your story online, I understand that you:
(researcher will provide a brief summary of online text found in the subject's story or interview)
2. What else would you include in this summary of your experience as an openly gay college male student-athlete?
3. When you think about your experiences as an openly gay college male student-athlete, what else comes to mind?
4. In what ways did participating in your particular sport contribute to your experience as an openly gay college male student-athlete?

PEER CULTURE SYSTEMS

5. How would you describe the academic and athletic peer culture systems in which you participate on your campus? *(i.e. who, where, interactions; researcher will offer a definition of peer culture if needed)*
 - a. Have your experiences differed based on academic vs. athletic peer culture environments and interactions?
 - b. Do you think your experiences were influenced by your gay identity?
 - i. *(if so)* How?
6. Does the concept of “ally” apply to any individuals within you academic and/or athletics peer culture environments? *(offer them the definition of “ally” if needed)*
7. Think about an individual(s) within your peer culture systems that you consider the biggest positive influence(s) towards your experiences as an openly gay male student-athlete either/both academically and athletically -
 - a. How has this person been influential?
 - b. Has this person provided any direct guidance regarding your experience and identity as a gay male?
 - i. If so, what influence, if any, did this guidance have towards your experiences participating in athletics?
 - ii. *(If influenced)* Describe specific experiences or interactions you engaged in that were influenced by this guidance?

8. Think about an individual(s) or interactions that you consider as negative influence towards your experiences both academically and athletically -
 - a. How has this person or interaction been a negative influence towards your college experience?
 - b. Do you feel this negative experience or interaction was due to your gay identity?
 - i. If yes, what specifically within this experience indicates that the interaction was due to your gay identity?
 - ii. *(If due to gay identity)* Describe how you responded to this interaction?
 - iii. *(If due to gay identity)* Describe how this impacted your athletics participation?
9. As you think about your college experience, did you feel you received adequate support within your academic and athletic peer culture systems to help you achieve a positive overall experience as an openly gay male college student-athlete?
 - a. Is there any area you consider could be improved?

CONCLUSION

10. Based upon your experiences, what individual and environmental attributes are needed to ensure a positive college experience as an openly gay student-athlete?
 - a. *(if identifies attributes)* Which of the attributes you mentioned, if any, do you think have been most influential towards your experience?
11. Are there any other thoughts you have that you think would be helpful in my research?