Who are the Champions? Using a Multilevel Model to Examine Employee Support for LGBT-Inclusion in Sport Organizations

E. Nicole Melton, Texas A&M University
George Cunningham (Advisor), Texas A&M University

Abstract 2012-224 Friday, May 25, 2012 2:40 PM

Individuals who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) continue to face prejudice and discrimination in the workplace (Sartore & Cunningham, 2010; Ragins, 2008). According to Ragins, Singh, and Cornwell (2007), nearly 40 percent of employees who are LGBT report facing some form of hostility or harassment while at work, and almost one out of 10 LGBT individuals state they have been dismissed unfairly, or pressured to voluntarily resign from their position, because of their sexual orientation. In addition, nearly three quarters of heterosexual employees believe LGBT people are the most likely minority group to experience discrimination (i.e., termination, harassment, denied promotion) in the workplace (Ragins et al., 2007).

Instances of sexual prejudice in the workplace are especially apparent in sport organizations. For instance, Krane and Barber’s (2005) qualitative analysis revealed how lesbian coaches continuously encounter heterosexist work environments and feel forced to conceal their sexual orientation as a way to escape the negative consequences of being labeled a lesbian in sport. This negative treatment is not isolated to lesbian coaches, as recent investigations report similar findings among gay men (Cavailler, 2011) and heterosexual women presumed to be lesbian who work in sport organizations (Sartore & Cunningham, 2010). The effects of such treatment can be immense: LGBT employees who work in unsupportive work environments report experiencing greater work-related stress, lower job satisfaction, decreased organizational commitment, and increased employee withdrawal behaviors (Garnets & Herek, 2007; Hammer, Bauer, & Grandey, 2003; Ragins, 2008).

To circumvent these negative outcomes and ensure LGBT employees feel welcomed in the workplace, much research now focuses on how organizations can create a more inclusive work environment for sexual minorities (Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Huffman, Watrous, & King; Martinez & Hebl, 2010; Ragins, 2008). This work has primarily investigated how organizational policies, such as statements prohibiting discrimination, the provision of domestic partner benefits, offering diversity training that focus on LGBT issues, or establishing networking opportunities for LGBT employees, influence LGBT employees’ experiences. Having such policies can positively relate to organizational outcomes. For instance, Cunningham (2011b) examined performance outcomes related to sexual orientation diversity in NCAA Division I athletic programs. In his study, athletic departments that combined high sexual orientation diversity with a proactive diversity strategy (i.e., a strategy that values diversity and emphasizes inclusion) were able to significantly outperform other programs—in some instances, these programs earned almost seven times the NACDA points of their peers. In a follow-up study, Cunningham (2011a) also found that high sexual orientation diversity positively related to a creative work environment when the organization had a strong commitment to diversity. Thus, these studies provide empirical evidence of how sexual orientation diversity can substantially improve organizational performance, but only in a context that values diversity and inclusion.

Although a number of empirical studies examine reasons for and outcomes of organizational support for diversity, a limited amount of research examines why individual employees support or oppose inclusive policies or practices. This is an unfortunate omission for several reasons. First, employee support is vital to the success of diversity initiatives (Avery, 2011). For instance, when employees or supervisors do not show support for LGBT-inclusive practices, many of the benefits gained by offering formal forms of organizational support are lost (Griffith & Hebl, 2002). Second, research suggests the attitudes and actions of employees can effectively create more inclusive work environments and can be a tremendous source of support for sexual minorities—even in the absence of formal, organizational support. Collectively, the aforementioned research suggests employee support is one of the key determinants in creating and sustaining inclusive work environments; however, limited research has examined the causes and consequences of this form of support.

Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the characteristics of employees who are more or less...
likely to endorse and advocate for LGBT inclusiveness. In doing so, I adopt a systems perspective, which recognizes that employee behaviors are shaped by multiple factors at various levels of analysis (Chelladurai, 2009). By adopting such a perspective, I gain a more complete understanding of how individuals can both shape and be shaped by their sport environment (cf. Cunningham, 2010a)—other diversity researchers have also demonstrated the efficacy of adopting a systems approach to understanding diversity-related phenomena (e.g., Cunningham, 2010; Cunningham & Sagas, 2008). Thus, I adopted a systems theory approach to develop an overall picture of how factors at the micro- (i.e., individual forces) and meso- (i.e., organizational and group forces) levels of analysis influence an individual’s level of support for LGBT inclusiveness.

A multimethod, qualitative approach was appropriate in this study to garner a greater understanding of the employees’ perception of inclusion. This involved using participant observation, interviews, and analysis of secondary documents to investigate the particular case. I conducted interviews with 13 athletic department coaches and staff who worked in a variety of departmental units. The participants were mostly female (53.8%), White (84.6%), ranged in age from 25 to 43 years (M = 31.49; SD = 5.46) and had all worked in the athletic department for a significant amount of time (M = 5.32; SD = 2.87). Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. NVivo 9 was used to store the data and assist with analysis. Complete Word file transcripts were imported into NVivo 9 where free nodes (cf. open coding, Strauss & Corbin, 1990) were used to categorize portions of text. Once free nodes (n = 53) were created, they were then grouped into 12 trees (cf. axial coding, Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Using the concepts in the theoretical framework as a guide, all tree concepts were subjected to a visual inspection by the author and were combined to develop higher order themes.

Results indicate that various micro-level (demographics, personality, experiences with LGBT individuals) and meso-level factors (organizational culture for diversity, support of relevant others) influenced the level of employee support for LGBT inclusive policies. Furthermore, power meaningfully influenced these dynamics, such that individuals in low status positions within the athletic department were hesitant to show support for LGBT equality. However, those who did champion LGBT inclusive initiatives successfully modeled supportive behaviors and positive attitudes toward LGBT individuals, vocally opposed discriminatory treatment, and provided sexual minorities with a safe space at work. In the final presentation, I will discuss implications and future directions.