Blocked Shots: The Informal Organization and Power as Barriers to Marginalized Individuals in the National Basketball Association

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On April 2, 2013, during a roundtable of sports professionals hosted by The Huffington Post, a participant asked whether the National Basketball Association (NBA) should be more inclusive of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) individuals. Legendary Coach Phil Jackson responded, “That’s a ridiculous question. I mean, none of us have probably ever seen it in all our careers. There’s no inclusiveness to be had” (Wong, 2012, p. 1). When the moderator asked Coach Jackson if he thought there were gay players in the NBA, Jackson responded, “[I’ve] never run into it in all of my career” (Wong, 2012, p. 1). Given that former NBA players John Ameachi and Jason Collins came out in 2007 and 2013 respectively, the implications of Coach Jackson’s statements cannot be ignored. To our knowledge, there are currently no out gay or bisexual players or coaches in the NBA. However, research from the Williams Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles estimates that 3.6% of men in the United States identify as gay or bisexual (Gates, 2011). These statistics suggest that there may be closeted gay or bisexual men in the NBA. Accordingly, this research aims to investigate barriers to sexual minorities, as well as other marginalized individuals in the NBA.

Though attitudes toward LGBT individuals continue to improve (Herck, 2009), sexual minorities still face prejudice in sport. Indeed, several studies suggest that sexual prejudice and hostile climates exist for LGBT individuals in our society (e.g., Gill, 2006; Herck, 1998). It is generally accepted that in the employment context gay men are commonly stereotyped as feminine, and lesbians are stereotyped as masculine (Tilcsik, 2011). This phenomenon is magnified in situations where employers, such as the NBA, seek applicants with stereotypically masculine and heterosexual traits (Tilcsik, 2011). Such stereotypes have produced an environment where gay athletes, who may be seen as feminine or passive, remain closeted. Likewise, Walker and Satore-Baldwin (2013) examine the role of hegemonic masculinity and institutionalized bias towards women in men’s collegiate basketball. Thus, their results provide evidence that men’s college basketball is a hyper masculine institution. This culture may be prevalent in the professional ranks as well. Cavalier (2011) provides research focusing on the experiences of ten gay men working in sports. Similarly, Melton, Cunningham, and Shilby (2013) analyze workplace experiences of sport employees who are LGBT from a social categorization theory perspective. While the past literature addresses experiences of women and LGBT individuals at the collegiate level and some professional sports organizations, none squarely seek to address the organizational barriers facing sexual minorities employed or seeking employment in the NBA. Given this gap in the literature, the purpose of this study is twofold. First, this study seeks to examine the role of the informal organization and the use of power as barriers to marginalized individuals working in or seeking employment in the NBA. Second, from a socio-organizational and phenomenological perspective approach, this study seeks to investigate factors influencing the lack of out gay players or coaches in the NBA.

Organizations are comprised of both formal and informal organizations (Bernard, 1938). While the formal organization can be seen as the normative social system designed by managers, the informal organization is the emergent pattern of social actions within the organization (Gulati & Puranam, 2009). Past literature recognizes the role of informal organizations in shaping formal organizations (e.g., Bernard, 1938; Simon 1947). Specifically, theorists have noted that without the informal organization, the formal organization would cease to exist (Bernard, 1938; Simon, 1947). This is because informal organizations establish certain attitudes, understandings, habits, and institutions, which create the conditions under which the formal organization arises (Bernard, 1938). Thus, in its purest form, the informal organization can be seen as an intricate web of interactions, groupings, and contacts that form the very basis of the formal organization. (Bernard, 1938). The attitudes and “states of mind” promoted by the informal organization heavily influence the experience, knowledge, attitudes and emotions of those within the organization (Bernard, 1938). Accordingly, this study will investigate whether informal organizations within the hyper masculine NBA environment promote homophobic attitudes and reinforce heteronormative hiring practices, which serve as barriers both to marginalized coaches and players currently employed and those seeking employment.
in the NBA. Further, because a large part of communication in organizations are informal and communication is maintained within the informal organization, informal organizations can serve as barriers to communication and present oppositions to change (Barnard, 1938; Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993). This study will examine informal organizations’ ability to obstruct the flow of critical communication to both marginalized coaches and players employed and seeking employment; thereby, effectively preventing an overall climate of change that would be more inclusive for LGBT individuals.

The second barrier to the aforementioned marginalized coaches and players is the use of power by authoritative figures in the NBA. Power can be seen as the ability to make things happen and be a causal agent to initiate change (Follett, 1942). Similarly, power is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis upon which this probability rests (Heiskala, 2001; Weber, 1978). Given that the NBA is mostly comprised of heterosexual men, our study will show that the use of power by these authority figures serve as an organizational barrier that reduces the incentives for current sexual minority players and coaches to reveal their sexual identities, while discouraging other minority candidates from ever applying.

Following a combination of methods proposed by Moustakas (1994) as well as Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2012) data is being collected and analyzed simultaneously using semi-structured interviews. Participants are currently and continuously being recruited using purposive sampling. Participants must fit the criteria of being a sexual minority, male, basketball coach or player, and employed or seeking employment in the NBA. In accordance with Moustakas (1994) as well as Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2012) data will be transcribed, clustered, condensed, and compiled into first-order concepts, second-order concepts, and aggregate dimensions. This systematic approach to data collection is being administered to the data in an effort to provide evidence supporting the reliability and validity of our data as a result of the trustworthiness and authenticity of our research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

The final presentation will include finalized results, conclusive themes with verbatim quotes, a data structure model, limitations, and suggestions on how future research may build on this study.