Allyship in Sport: Examining Bystander Reactions to Acts of Inclusion

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Sport has made tremendous progress in becoming more accepting and inclusive for individuals who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT)—major media outlets frequently discuss LGBT-related issues; a growing number of non-profit organizations now focus on eliminating LGBT discrimination in sport; and more sport organizations offer sexual orientation diversity training (see Griffin, 2012). Despite this progress, not all athletes feel comfortable to promote social change within sport settings (Melton & Cunningham, 2012). This is regrettable, as the psychological and physical tolls of experiencing LGBT discrimination are considerable. Indeed, past research demonstrates that LGBT student-athletes are more likely to face prejudice than their heterosexual peers, leading to greater instances of anxiety, stress, depression, and feelings of self-hate (Krane, 1997; Melton & Cunningham, 2012).

Given the negative effects of LGBT discrimination, more research now examines ways to create inclusive spaces. Individuals who champion diversity are likely key for creating inclusive sport environments (Avery, 2011; Melton & Cunningham, 2015). Specifically, meaningful change is more likely to occur when bystanders (e.g., classmates, teammates) witnessing discrimination insist upon stopping such behavior. Bystanders not only set an example for appropriate behavior but also can successfully persuade others to adopt more inclusive mindsets (Martinez & Hebl, 2010).

Drawing from the organizational change and championing literature (Avery, 2011), the purpose of this study is to examine the effects of bystander championing behaviors (LGBT support), especially those enacted by college athletes, may have upon college students’ perceptions of inclusivity within academic settings. Specifically, using focus group interviews, this research examined bystander reactions to witnessing pro-LGBT behaviors and answered the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the effects of witnessing LGBT inclusive behaviors?
RQ2: What impact do athletes have when they support LGBT inclusion?

Students from five Division I universities (N = 102) participated in the study. The sample was mostly Caucasian (74.9%), heterosexual (88.3%), and evenly split among men and women.

We randomly assigned participants to one of four types of focus groups that varied based on type of activism (support: silence) and type of bystander (athlete: non-athlete). In all conditions, the participants witnessed a trained confederate state that he would not want an openly gay teammate. Then, they observed one of two scenarios: the first, a trained bystander voiced his support for LGBT teammates, in the second, the bystander remained silent. In half of the sample, the intervening bystander was a college basketball or football player while the other half had a male, non-athlete bystander. After the exercise ended, we debriefed participants and asked them to discuss their reaction to the events that transpired. We used NVivo 12 software to analyze the interview transcriptions.

Three main themes emerged from the data: Athlete Voices Matter, Speaking up is Contagious, Silence Stifles Progress. The findings suggest athletes who vocally express support for LGBT inclusion can play a vital role in creating safe spaces on campus. In addition, when one person displays support, others are more likely to express similar sentiments. During the presentation, we will discuss theoretical contributions, practical implications, and future directions.