Comparing the Black & Gay Male Athlete:
Patterns in American Oppression

Eric Anderson
University of Bath

Mark McCormack
University of Bath

In this article, we examine the political stratifications of society by race and sexuality, and the processes by which sport helps subordinate members of each group. In applying social movement theory to gay and black men in sport, we highlight the historically similar patterns of oppression levied upon each group. We develop a four stage social movement theory model that may be useful in predicting the future patterns of homophobic discrimination, as openly gay athletes gain prominence in sport. We then discuss the intersectionality of race and sexuality with respect to sporting men, and argue that further research is necessary to understand the relatedness of these two seemingly disparate categories. Finally, we issue a political call for black sports leaders to actively participate in supporting the gay liberationist project.

Imagining the Gay and Black Male Athlete

When we think of black male athletes, we normally connect them to highly competitive and combative teamsports, like American football and basketball. Or, we associate them with individual sporting events that require strength and explosiveness, like sprinting and boxing (Van Sterkenburg and Knoppers, 2004). These images (strength, speed, and muscularity) are culturally produced to naturalize black abilities. However, something less discussed is that these stereotypes also contribute to a cultural subjugation of the gay male athlete.

Unlike the power associated with black athleticism, participation for gay male athletes is associated with feminized terrains (like ice-skating, cheerleading and gymnastics), and other non-aggressive sports, such as swimming, running and diving (Adams, 1993; Anderson, 2005). So whereas black men's bodies compete by collision, gay men are awarded points through decision. Whereas black athletes are perceived as thugs, masculinized by their sporting space (Majors, 1990), gay athletes are feminized by theirs (Anderson, 2005). Accordingly, black athletes sweat, fuck and fight, while gay men are concerned with the aesthetics of their form. As such, dominant discourse pertaining to black and gay athletes holds them to be culturally incompatible categories (Boykin, 2005). Despite the gains of both the civil rights movement and the progress toward gay and lesbian social inclusion, the understanding in sport remains that black athletes come in only one sexuality and gay men come in just one color.

Another cultural presumption is that black men are overrepresented in sport. This presumption, based on black athletes' success in basketball and football, is wholly misleading when one considers the near-total absence of black athletes outside baseball,

basketball, football and track (Henderson, 1939; Coakley, 2002). For gay athletes the situation is worse. There are few openly gay athletes at the lower levels of sport, and none in the professional ranks of competitive teamsports. However, the situation is bleakest for openly gay black athletes; who are extraordinarily rare in any sport, at any level of play (Anderson, 2005; Kian and Anderson, 2009).

This both produces and reinforces the perception that homosexuality is 'a problem' for whites only. For example, in 1965, the Moynihan Report discussed the deterioration of the African-American family as elevated over white families because of the absence of the black father: however, nowhere was it assumed that these black children would turn out gay. Yet this is precisely a dominant (and false) attribution of homosexuality among white men (Freud, 1905; Spencer, 1995). Accordingly, at a cultural level, we seem unable to imagine black men as gay, and this is particularly true for black gay athletes—something evidenced by the fact that no strong prevalent stereotype for them exists.[1]

This is not to say that gay black men don't play sport. Rather it highlights the realities of interlocking categories of oppression: That race, class, gender and sexuality are stratifications of society that intensify when combined (Crenshaw, 1991; McCall 2005). For example, black gay athletes would not only have to deal with the racism and homophobia of the dominant culture, but they would also fear elevated rates of discrimination within their own communities (Griffin, 1998; Siegel and Epstein, 1996).

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[1] This may be one reason why NBA basketball player John Amaechi is frequently referred to as British.

Gay black athletes might therefore find themselves excluded from both support systems (Anderson, 2005).

Outside of sport, we recognize that there is (to some degree) a declining significance of race (Wilson, 1978), but we highlight that institutional racism and racial domination persist (Eitzen, 2003; Ferguson, 2000; hooks, 1992; Wacquant, 2001). One need only recall the images of Hurricane Katrina to illustrate the plight of many blacks in contemporary America (Allen, 2007; Rivera and Miller, 2007; White *et al*, 2007). But it is important to note that while cultural racism is decreasing, black men also maintain elevated rates of homophobia; a factor that has received little academic investigation (Clarke, 1983; Froyum, 2007; King, 2004; Southall et. al, forthcoming; Waldner, Sikka and Baig, 1999).

In this article, we aim to contribute to black and gay scholarship in three main ways. First, we illustrate theoretical novelty and utility by applying social movement theory to gay and black men in sport. Black and gay male athletes offer a useful comparison of the ways in which distinct subjugated groups navigate similar concerns in a common setting. We highlight the historically similar patterns of oppression levied upon each group and develop a four stage social movement theory model to compare progress and predict the future patterns of homophobic discrimination as, openly gay athletes gain prominence in sport. Second, we discuss the intersectionality of race and sexuality with respect to sporting men, arguing that further research is necessary to understand the relatedness of these two seemingly disparate categories. Finally, we issue a political call for black sports leaders to actively participate in supporting the gay liberationist project.

New Social Movement Theory

Whereas much of old social movement literature examines issues of economic disparity, new social movement theory looks at identity politics for various groups disenfranchised by hegemonic culture. Accordingly, Buechler (1999) argues for a multiplicity of related social movement theories, each a variant on general approach to gaining rights for the oppressed—something he calls a new social movement. By emphasizing identity, lifestyle and culture (as well as or without political activism for policy) the cultural aspects of social movements are viewed as important as the political gains. This, in other words, is a loosely defined and unorganized collection of agents pushing for cultural and/or political change without central leadership or strategy. In maintaining a multiplicity of foci, new social movements continue in ways social movements with just one definable objective cannot, after that objective is reached. This is the case with both black and gay athletes in sport.

By analyzing the political and sporting histories; the collective experiences of denied citizenship; and the cultural and political processes that black and gay male social movements have undergone in their liberation projects, it becomes apparent that gay and black Americans (and athletes) share much in common. We propose that there are some crude yet distinguishable and useful stages that relate to the social, political and sporting progression of these two groups as they 'campaign' for political and social progress; stages that share similarities with what Sage describes in the introduction to his book *Racism and College Athletics: the African American Athlete's Experience* (2000). We

define these stages as total domination, contestation, perceived liberation and meritocracy.

This sequence is not to suggest that we view the political and social progress of these groups as occurring linearly, but just as feminism has been described as having a first, second and now third wave, we find utility in creating linear stages for understanding black and gay athletes' cultural and institutional progression in sport. Furthermore, the cultural progression of these groups has not developed simultaneously. We argue that black athletes are currently at the stage of *perceived liberation*, while gay athletes are still in the process of *contestation*. Finally, we note that our four stage social movement model also applies to how the academy studies these minority groups.

The first stage occurs when a marginalized group experiences *total domination*. Here, dominant cultural scripts and academic research examine subordinated groups through an oppressive, totalizing framework; seeking to explore their inadequacies, faults, and wrongdoings (c.f. Leznoff, 1956). Even if unintentional, the framework upon which early academic investigations are designed constructs a hierarchy of privilege and diminishing cultural power (c.f. Freud, 1905).

The second stage *contestation* is when social trends combine with the minority group's use of identity politics to produce autobiographical, ethnographic and polemical texts that give voice to the oppressed; helping them resist their cultural domination (Rich, 1980; Rubin, 1984). The third stage is more complicated, because it is characterized by the cultural perception of equality, even though critical thinkers examine the continued covert operations of prejudice (Epstein, 1993; Richardson, 1996). The final stage

meritocracy is the aim of most identity politics projects; it is when that stratification no longer serves as an ordering principle of society.

Black Homophobia

Racist oppression is inexcusable. It should not, however, prevent scholars from also examining the homophobia of black men. Whereas there exists a great deal of sociological inquiry into the ways in which black athletes are culturally, economically, and structurally discriminated against in the sport-media complex, we have failed to examine black Americans as oppressors in sport also (Anderson, 2005).

Black homophobia recently came to cultural awareness through California's proposition 8. Here (rightly or wrongly) the media widely reported that blacks (who also represent elevated rates of religious fundamentalism) voted disproportionally against gay marriage. In response, Jenkins, Lambert & Baker (forthcoming), surveyed university students at their Toledo University, finding no difference in prejudice between black and white students. However, the preponderance of research shows the opposite. Most studies find that black men maintain elevated rates of homophobia compared to white (Baunauch & Burgess, 2010; Herek & Capitanio, 1995; Waldner, Sikka and Baig, 1999; Southall et. al forthcoming; Ward, 2007). Part of this stems from a denial of homosexuality in black communities. Thus, blacks are more capable of viewing homosexuality as 'a problem' for white men (Froyum, 2007; King, 2004).

However, in surveying NCAA division one athletes at three major universities in the American South, Southall and colleagues (forthcoming) found that black university athletes maintain significantly elevated rates of homophobia compared to their white

teammates (and men over women). Professional sport agent Ralph Cindrich (1999) supports this finding in sport. Of his 175 rookie NFL players (which he commissioned to have interviewed in 1998), 92% of white players said that they felt comfortable playing with a gay teammate, compared to 60% of black players. Similarly, 53% of white players said they would be comfortable sharing a hotel room with an openly gay player, compared to just 29% of black players. When athletes were asked how they would react if a gay player were to proposition him, 5% of whites but 29% of blacks indicated they would respond with "physical assault." The reverse, however, does not appear to hold true; gay men are less likely to be racist than straight men (Rosenfeld and Kim, 2005).

There are multiple reasons why black men are more homophobic than white. Black Americans are disproportionately represented in the lower economic classes and, for an otherwise marginalized group (Ferguson, 2000; Wacquant, 2001), homophobia is a way for black boys and men to raise their masculine capital by saying, 'at least I am not gay' (Froyum, 2007). Poorer black gay athletes might therefore feel compelled to remain closeted, so as not to disadvantage what they believe to be their route out of poverty (Anderson, 2005). This means that heterosexual black men very rarely interact with black gay men. Furthermore, gay culture, gay support systems, and much of what can be described as a gay male identity, have been established in a culture that presumes whiteness and elevated class status (Green, 2007). Finally, Baunauch & Burgess (2010) show that one reason for the elevated rates of homophobia among black college students is that, whereas whites are more likely to improve their attitudes about gays and lesbians after meeting a gay or lesbian—something known as contact theory (Allport, 1954), black men seem somewhat immune from the affect of this contact.

Even as leading black sportswriters draw parallels between gays and blacks in sport (Kian & Anderson, 2009), many black athletes do not recognize the damage of homophobia to their own community, nor do they see the commonalities of gay and black oppression (hooks, 2004). As such, articulating the similarities between these two groups may help both their claims for emancipation.

From Total Domination to Perceived Liberation

In applying our social movement stages, we first highlight that both black and gay men were once formally excluded from sport. Although blacks have been involved with sport throughout American history, for much of this time they did not play *in* sport. Rather, they were forced to participate for the pleasure of white audiences and for the profit of white owners (Wiggins, 1977; 1980a; 1980b). For gay men, however, homosexuality has been so criminalized that it was not until the modern era that men could come out. Homosexual behaviors were illegal (in many cases punishable by death) in most states until the 1970s, and it was not until 2004 that homosexual behaviors were decriminalized across America. However, it still remains permissible to discriminate against gay men across a number of institutions today: including work, housing, parenting, adoption, military service, religious affiliation and marriage. This, combined with an increasing record of physical violence against gay people throughout the 1980s (Herek, 1998), makes/made coming out of the closet daunting, so that gay men who play sport have almost exclusively denied their sexuality (Price and Parker, 2003; Pronger, 1990).

This ability of gay men to remain closeted has, however, led to an interesting argument concerning the social oppression of black and gay men. In discussing the issue

with black men, the primary author (who lectures extensively on the topic) often hears the complaint that it is unfair to compare gay oppression with black oppression because whereas black people cannot pass as white, most gay men can choose to pass as straight. However, embedded within the argument is the notion that because gay men *can* choose to pass as straight, they *should*. This argument is part of a larger homophobic strategy to displace the biological origin of sexual desire and reify homosexual identity as an individual (and immoral) choice (LeVay, 1996).

Another similarity is that gay political activism has borrowed from and sometimes mirrored that of the black experience. Gays have used social protest and civil disobedience alongside legislative actions in the same manner blacks have in the contestation stage. But even as judicial discrimination lessened over the decades and centuries, cultural oppression has continued to operate against men of both groups; in both overt and clandestine ways. For example, although slavery came to a legal conclusion in 1863, black Americans were still culturally bound by Jim Crow Laws and a racist social zeitgeist. Similarly, gay athletes (and gay men in general) are still bound by a restrictively heterosexist and culturally homophobic society (Pharr, 1997). These cultural imperatives mean that in the stage of *contestation* these groups' continue(d) to suffer overt discrimination by white, heterosexual men (Jarvie, 1991; hooks, 1990; Pronger, 1990; Spencer, 1995).

Much of the reason that these groups have been able to move from *total domination* to *contestation* lies in their political activism. With a decrease in cultural bigotry (Loftus, 2001; Wilson, 1978), individuals and organizations from each group earned more institutional and cultural freedom to contest their oppression. In the world of

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sport, the considerable success of black athletes inculcated the relationship between sport and the larger project of the black civil rights movement. For example, Jesse Owen winning four gold medals in Hitler's 1936 Olympics; Joe Louis's 1937 boxing heavyweight championship; and Harry Edwards' organization of the totemic black power salute at the awards ceremony of the 1968 Mexico Olympics stand out as historically significant sporting and cultural moments. While openly gay athletes do not have the same cultural capital, equivalent historical moments, or role models their social movement is helped by a few little-known retired sportsmen coming out: including David Kopay (NFL), Billy Bean (MLB), Esera Tuaolo (NFL) and John Amaechi (NBA). There has also been national figure-skating Champion Rudy Galindo (1995), eight-time American national diving champion David Pichler (1996), former world body building champion "Mr. Universe" Bob Paris (1984), and gold-medalist swimmer Bruce Hayes (1990), alongside a few dozen lesser known athletes to come out. Even so, these men prove that one can be both gay and a good athlete.

In examining the commonalities of oppression in the struggle from the first to second stage, we highlight that the tools straight white men use to preserve their ruling power are remarkably similar, regardless of the group to which they are applied. For example, both black and gay men have been portrayed as being physically inferior to white, heterosexual men. According to 'race logic' and Social Darwinism, white intellectuals largely scrutinized black men for their faults and inabilities, including their supposed athletic inferiority (Coakley, 2002; Hoberman, 1997; Logan, 1957). This is the same for gay men (Spencer, 1995), who were currently feminized to the extent that they were thought unable to compete with heteromasculine men (Pronger, 1990).

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However, the success of black male athletes and the burgeoning achievement of openly gay athletes have helped to challenge these perceptions of physical inferiority. For black men, athletic success has even led to a reversal of this stereotype, so that (problematically) black men today are thought athletically superior to white men (Entine, 2001; Van Sterkenburg and Knoppers, 2004). Concerning gay athletes, Anderson (2008) has recently shown that whereas straight men used to only see gay men as physically inferior, today they see gay athletes as maintaining the possibility of being *equally* masculine, and therefore just as athletic as straight (white) men.

Once members of each group finally gained access to the heterosexual, white-run institution of sport (*contestation*), economic and cultural determinants affected the sports in which athletes focused. Blacks first created their own "Negro" leagues, showing their economic viability in the process (Kelley, 2000). Later, black athletes began to compete and gained a considerable foothold in baseball, basketball, football, boxing, and track. Accordingly, they contested their discrimination in highly masculinized sporting arenas, where physicality, power and force are paramount for athletic success. Oppositely, openly gay men have concentrated on a different set of sports. They come out in the culturally feminized sports of swimming, diving, ice-skating, body building and cheerleading. What is important here is that each group of men has been structured into certain sports. Consequently, they do not maintain the principle privilege that white heterosexual men retain to play *all* sports.

For black athletes, who have reached *perceived liberation*, studies demonstrate that racist attitudes still persist. For example, sports commentators often focus on black athletic prowess, compared to white intellectual ability to explain the similar

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accomplishments of different athletes (Bruce, 2004). Although these studies point to a wider array of representations, and a decreasing reliance on the 'black athlete' metaphor (Andrews, 1996), research suggests that televised American basketball commentary remains "heavily imbued with conventional racial stereotypes" (Eastman and Billings, 2001, p. 193).

Other evidence showing black athletes are in *perceived liberation* is that they must out-perform white athletes for equal playing time. Their athletic performance is also naturalized. Successful white athletes, however, are presented as successful through hard work (Hoberman, 2000; Shropshire, 1996). Black athletes are shown to be stacked away from positions that are central to the outcome of the game (such as pitching or quarter backing), even in sports in which they are well-represented. Continued racism is also highlighted by the lack of black men in managerial, coaching, administrative, and ancillary sporting occupations (Walker, 2005). Here, black athletes are attacked by the sports-media complex as being unable to control their emotions and maintaining poor attitudes. White athletes, however, escape most of this criticism (Murrell and Curtis, 1994).

The oppression of black athletes in this stage of *perceived liberation* is however heavily scrutinized by academic research (Carrington, 2007; Coakley, 2002; Douglas, 2005; Harris, 2000; Hastings, Zahran, and Cable, 2006; Jarvie, 1991; Smith, 2000). For example, Carrington and McDonald (2002) suggest that a "culture of racism" is deeply embedded in sport, arguing that sporting contests "act as a key signifier for wider questions about identity within racially demarcated societies in which racial narratives about the self and society are read both into and from sporting contests that are imbued

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with racial meanings" (p. 141). But despite this academic inquiry, biological distinctions continue to dominate cultural understandings of sporting performance (Andrews, 1996; Douglas, 2005; Entine, 2001; Long and Hylton, 2002) and Bruce (2004) argues that the sports media systematically reinforce racist ideologies, not because the media workers are active racists, but because of discourses and current constructions of knowledge which permeate that environment. As Hall (1981) explains, sport commentators and sporting media 'speak through' ideological discourses that are already active in society, providing a "means of 'making sense' of social relations and our place in them" (p. 19). As such, the production and transfer of ideologies are largely unconscious rather than with explicit intent (Bruce, 2004; Denison and Markula, 2005).

None of this however has been applied to gay men. Gay athletes do not need to be overtly oppressed because homophobia is still so widely accepted in the sporting arena (Anderson, 2002, 2005; Bridel and Rail, 2007: Pronger, 1990). Accordingly, we argue that gay athletes are only in *contestation*.

This is further evidenced by the fact that while gay boys join sport at the same rate as straight boys (because sport is made near compulsory in education), as adults, they often choose to leave the dominant sporting institution for their own segregated sporting leagues (Hekma, 1998). For example in 1989, Pitts found that there existed 132 gay sports organizations throughout the nation, suggesting the primary reason for creating these leagues was to escape the anti-gay attitudes of heterosexual leagues. Capitalizing on this, in 1982 Tom Waddell organized the first Gay Games, which opened to just a few thousand athletes at first but is now an event that hosts hundreds of thousands of competitors every four years. While some view this as a particularly socially positive

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event (eg. Waitt, 2003), we argue that the Gay Games also highlights the continuing practices of homophobic oppression—as self-segregation is often evidence of discrimination (c.f. hooks, 1992).

There is hope for gay athletes. For example, after John Amaechi came out, Kian and Anderson (2009) found that the sports media drastically changed the way they report on the issues, with less homophobia and more sensitivity. And, in the later years of black *contestation*, sporting owners and profiteers have found financial incentives for inclusion of members of each group. While this has long been the case for black fans and athletes (Guilianotti, 2005), sporting institutions are now slowly realizing that there are profits to be made from the inclusion of gay (and lesbian) athletes and supporters. For example, the Florida Marlins (alongside many professional teams) host an annual "gay day" at their Pro Players Stadium. The wealth and class status of many gay men carries with it the implication that oppression is expensive to those in power. This combined with decreasing homophobia means the gay liberationist project may soon enter the third stage. Accordingly, sociological work will have to examine the covert operations of oppression in the same manner they have done for black athletes.

Future Directions

In this article, we highlight the similar patterns of oppression of gay and black men in sport. By examining the intersectionality of race and sexuality, we show that society has bifurcated athletes into being black *or* gay. Then, by analyzing the experience of black athletes and applying social movement theory, we document the shared patterns of oppression that these groups share. We argue, however, that because there has been more

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progress in sport with regard to black men then there has been to gay men. This means that by drawing on research on racism in sport, we may predict certain ways in which openly gay men will face similar discrimination.

For example, as black athletes are shown to self-segregate out of the "thinking positions" and into the "speed" positions (Coakley, 2002; Eitzen, 2003), we may find that gay athletes also self-segregate out of the macho sports and into the individual (less aggressive) sports; and that they may only come out in select sports. Where it has been shown that in order for a black man to make the team he must be better than a white athlete, we may similarly find that that in order for an openly gay athlete to be picked by the professional (or collegiate) leagues, he will need to be better than his heterosexual teammates. Research on openly gay athletes has found this to be accurate so far (Anderson, 2002, 2005). So we might therefore be able to predict that it will be a long time before there are "average" openly gay athletes selected onto professional teams, just as there were few average black players until recently (Smith, 2000). Moreover, whereas black men were once thought to lower team morale and cohesion on competitive teamsports (Anderson, 2005), we should examine how gay men are viewed by their teammates today.

Adding to this analysis, just as black athletes are stacked into certain positions (Eitzen, 2003; Schneider and Eitzen, 1986) where they are less important to the outcome of the game (particularly in football and baseball), we might find that gay athletes are also stacked. For example, because they are mostly white, it is likely that gay men will be stacked into positions that require less physical aggression, and into positions more central to the outcome of the game (here perhaps at the expense of the black athlete).

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Finally, just as black athletes have had a difficult time making it to the ranks of coaches, managers, media members, and referees (Rasmussen, Esgate and Turner, 2005; Rimer, 1996; Walker, 2005); gay athletes might also have a hard time making it to these ranks (Anderson, 2000).

While Anderson (2005) has commented upon some of these similarities, as of yet no empirical literature exists that examines gay male athletes from these perspectives. Until now, it has been methodologically impossible to conduct such investigations—there simply have not been enough openly gay athletes to work with. However, it is our hope that this article will inspire a new generation of scholars concerned with equality in sport to make these empirical comparisons.

It is important to note that whereas sport once provided a space for the black contestation of white supremacy (Carrington, 1998), it has yet to serve as an arena where (black and white) men support the contestation of heterosexual supremacy. Accordingly, just as Oglesby and Schrader (2000) call on white Americans to end the denial, disregard and resistance they have historically used to maintain and sustain racism in our society, we call upon black Americans to do the same regarding their own homophobia. We call for black men (particularly those in positions of power and/or those with high media visibility) to overtly and passionately contest the homophobia which affects gay men and athletes. We call for the African American community to publicly contest the same form of discrimination that was, not so long ago, levied against members of their identity group.

Having settled on the limitations of identity politics (Seidman, 1993), we desire to see gays and blacks, women, people of other colors, and all athletic abilities, working

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together in a coalition of progressive politics to make sport a more socio-positive

institution. Or as Bickford (1997) argues, to see people coming together "in ways that

could *create* a democratic commons – one that is plural, egalitarian and communicative"

(p. 124). Hopefully this article will help us better understand the institutionalization of

white heterosexual privilege within sport, so that we may better wither at it—making

sport something closer to the meritocracy for which it is esteemed.

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