On the Door-Step of Equality:

Attitudes toward Gay Athletes among Academy Level Footballers

In this semi-structured interview research, we investigate the attitudes of 22 academy level association football (soccer) players who are potentially on the verge of becoming professional athletes. We find that, as a result of these men belonging to a generation holding inclusive attitudes towards homosexuality, independent of whether they maintain contact with gay men, they are unanimously supportive of gay men coming out on their team. Thus, this research supports a growing body of literature suggesting that teamsport culture is no longer a bastion of homophobia in the United Kingdom. Their support includes athletes being unconcerned with sharing rooms with gay players, changing with them in the locker rooms, or relating to them on a social and emotional level. The only apprehension they maintain is that having a gay teammate might somewhat alter homosocial banter, as they would not want to offend that individual.

Introduction

In February 2013, a 25 year-old ex-Leeds United football player, Robbie Rogers, publicly revealed that he was gay. His coming out was met with overwhelmingly positive responses from the media, and support from his old teammates. In May he signed with the Los Angeles Galaxy and took to the field as the world's only openly gay elite level professional footballer—he received a standing ovation when introduced to the crowed.

The overwhelmingly positive response to Rogers' outing from media and fans aligns with recent academic studies into the relationship between homosexuality and men's teamsports in the western world (Anderson, 2011a). In examining gay male athletes on ostensibly heterosexual, educationally-based sport teams comprised of young men, inclusivity toward gay males among heterosexual athletes is not only the norm in research conducted after the millennium (Adams, 2011; Adams and Anderson, 2012; Anderson, 2002, 2009, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; Bush et al., 2012; Dashper, 2012), but it remains the solitary finding on the topic. However, this body of research often contrasts with a culturally perceived understanding of homophobia among elite level soccer players in the United Kingdom (Caudwell, 2011; Hughson and Free, 2011).

In the absence of an openly gay male athlete in British soccer, and without access to interview current premiership players, we are left merely with speculation concerning the potential experiences of an openly gay British premiership player. However, in this research we examine the attitudes among all of the players (22) on one highly successful academy squad. So while we cannot empirically comment on current British Premiership players' attitudes toward the prospect of having a gay teammate, this article documents such attitudes of the next generation of British players.

We find that because these men belong to a generation with inclusive perspectives on homosexuality, whether they maintain contact with gay men or not, they nonetheless remain unanimously supportive of gay men coming out on their team. While the levels of positive support offered to teammates slightly vary according to religiosity, race, and previous contact with gay men, the vast majority of players expressed deep seated inclusive attitudes, the extent of which was explicated through their predictions of intervening with homophobic bullying. Additionally, players unanimously maintained that even if their least favorite teammate came out as gay, matters would not change, even if they were to share a room with him.

However, the one place where our participants suggest that the presence of a gay male would alter social relations among teammates concerns the homogenous social relations of homosexualized banter in private spaces (e.g. locker rooms and hotel rooms). Here, players fear that the presence of an openly gay athlete would disrupt homosocial banter. This, we argue, is not however a reflection of homophobia, but instead an introduction of difference into an otherwise homogenous group of young men who suggest they do not wish to either offend a hypothetical gay teammate, nor send him the 'wrong message' about sexual attraction to him when bantering about gay sex. Thus, consistent with research on the actual experiences of men who come out in this type of sport, among this demographic of young men (Anderson, 2011c; Adams and Anderson, 2012), the prospective presence of an openly gay player is thought of as something which might alter homosocial relations, but not engender disapproval of that alteration.

Theorizing the Relationship between Masculinities, Sport, and Homophobia

Much of Britain's cultural obsession for competitive teamsport comes as a result of the establishment of institutionalized sport for the masses at the turn of the 20th Century. This was a cultural moment exemplified by a moral panic over the supposed 'softening' of boys masculinity. Football was thought to provide a mechanism to reverse this emasculation (Dunning, 1999; Walvin, 1994). Hargreaves (1982) argues that the value of competitive teamsports was also bolstered during this time, not just because of the softening of men, but also because male homosexuality was also associated with men's softness/femininity. Anderson (2009) adds to this argument, suggesting that because heterosexual men cannot definitively prove that they are heterosexual they aligning their gendered identities with an extreme (orthodox) form of masculinity to avoid homosexual suspicion.

Anderson (2009, 2011a) expands upon Kimmel's and Connell's theorizing, with the articulation of inclusive masculinity theory, suggesting that homophobia serves as the primary policing mechanism of polarized gendered identities (male and female) due to heterosexual men's inability to definitively prove their heterosexuality to others. As a result, men must strictly adhere to terrains or behaviors coded as masculine in order to avoid homosexual suspicion.

Anderson further suggests that when a culture's level of homophobia is low, there exists less gendered differentiation between the sexes (Cancian, 1987), but when it is high, homophobia regulates individuals through fear of being socially homosexualized - a condition he calls 'homohysteria.' A homohysteric culture necessitates three factors: 1) widespread awareness that homosexuality exists as a static sexual orientation within a given culture; 2) cultural disapproval towards homosexuality (i.e., homonegativity); and 3) disapproval of men's

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femininity due to association with homosexuality. Importantly, all three conditions must be maintained for homohysteria to persist.

Anderson (2009) argues that limited same-sex physical and emotional intimacy among heterosexual men is therefore a product of cultural homohysteria, which he argues was at its peak in the United Kingdom in the mid-1980s. During this epoch, the 1987 British Social Attitudes Survey reported that 63.6% of the population thought homosexuality was always wrong. A decade later, surveys continued to show disapproval for male homosexuality among teamsport athletes. Although we can locate no research on athletic adolescent male's attitudes in the United Kingdom specifically during this time, Wolf-Wendel et al. (2001: 47) showed that heterosexual male athletes in the United States were, "unwilling to confront and accept homosexuality." Additionally, Hekma (1998: 2) argued that in Holland, "gay men who are seen as queer and effeminate are granted no space whatsoever in what is generally considered to be a masculine preserve and a macho enterprise."

However, despite these previously negative reports, cultural homophobia has rapidly decreased since the turn of the Millenium. In 2002, Anderson conducted the first research on openly gay male high school and collegiate athletes, finding that the coming out experiences of the 26 openly gay athletes interviewed was much more positive than the athletes themselves were expecting. Gay male athletes were surprised at the inclusivity they experienced from their teammates and almost all regretted not coming out sooner.

Since Anderson's (2002) study, there has been a growing body of research on the topic among adolescent males (Adams, 2011; Adams et al., 2010; Anderson, 2005, 2009, 2011b,

2011c; Bush et al., 2012; McCormack and Anderson, 2010). These results have also provided a challenge to the traditional notions of hierarchically-structured masculinities, instead finding that as homophobia decreases, masculinities soften. As a result, masculinities are seen to exist, "in a horizontal (not stratified) alignment" (Anderson and McGuire, 2010: 251). Accordingly, Anderson and others argue that today's adolescent male youth (athletes and non-athletes alike) no longer live within a homohysteric culture. Instead they live in one of social inclusion.

Evidencing the Western shift from a culture of athletic homohysteria into one of inclusivity, Anderson et al. (2011) used sport team initiation rituals in the United Kingdom, to monitor behaviors over a seven year period. During this time, same-sex hazing activities were phased out in line with the decrease in cultural homohysteria. Then, Anderson (2011b) replicated his 2002 study with openly gay athletes, enabling a comparison to be made between temporal epochs. Anderson found that gay athletes had had an even more positive experience than the athletes from the 2002 study. Regardless of the sport played, when athletes came out to their teammates, they were not treated with negative difference.

Bush et al. (2012) have recently provided the first quantitative account of British university athletes' attitudes toward having a gay male teammate. Questionnaires were given to 216 male athletes from a range of sports when they began at a major sporting university in England. Results showed that there was very little homophobia upon entering the university and none upon exiting.

Despite these cultural improvements, however, there are currently no openly gay players in professional British football. While it is beyond the scope of this article to explain why professional gay athletes do not come out in this sport (see Hargreaves and Anderson, 2013),

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important to this research is that the culture toward homosexuality among players is rapidly shifting toward that of not just tolerance or acceptance, but overt support.

Homosociality and Homosexual Banter

A culture of overt support does not, however, mean that the presence of a gay male athlete on a team might not disrupt the normal, homosocial, operation of an otherwise homogenous team. Masculinity studies have long-determined that heterosexual masculinity is a front which is essentially granted by other men (Kimmel, 1994). Here, males seek the approval of other males, both identifying with and competing against them in order to raise their heteromasculine capital (Anderson 2005).

Much of this includes the playful, direct, overt and sometimes ironic establishment of one's heterosexuality through sexualized discourse and banter, which oftentimes includes men feigning gay sex with one another (Diamond et al., 2000). Here, young heterosexual men - normally in private spaces like parties, hotel rooms and, most frequently, locker rooms - pretend to be sexually attracted to one another. In jest, they complement each other's bodies, or make jokes about being sexually attracted to their teammates. They might, for example, comment that one looks good in that towel, or smack one's ass as a gesture of artificial homosexual attraction. Still, it is highly common for homosocial groups of young straight men to pretend to give each other oral sex, and there is also a great deal of mock anal sex in these interactions (Schroeder, 2002).

This type of behavior is widely documented in both interview and ethnographic research among adolescent, heterosexual team sport players on sex-segregated teams (Anderson, 2005,

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2009; Anderson and McGuire, 2010; Flood, 2008) and can be interpreted many different ways. One might, for example, view it as a homophobic mocking of gay men, while others might prefer to view it as a method for ironically showing that one is not gay in a culture of homohysteria (Anderson et al., 2012). Still others view it as a mechanism for the degradation of women (Sedgwick, 1985).

The view we think most aptly suits this research however, comes through McCormack and Anderson (2010), who describe this as a form of ironic heterosexual recuperation—where men ironically proclaim same-sex desire to consolidate their heteromasculine standing. Crucially, they argue that this is a way that heterosexual men prove their masculinity *without* being homophobic. This, they argue is necessary, because unlike gay men who are socially accepted (believed) to be gay upon proclamation, the same does not hold true of heterosexual men (McCormack, 2011).

Most important to this paper, however, is that previous research on the experiences of openly gay men in sport, including ethnography on a university soccer team before, during and after one of its players had come out as gay (Adams and Anderson, 2012) shows that mock gay sex, can also operate between straight and gay men, with the purpose of including gay men. In feigning sexual interaction with a gay teammate, heterosexual players are capable of showing their support (Anderson, 2005).

Exemplifying this, in a forthcoming article, Anderson shows that among a group of 50 adolescent boys he coaches in California (with three openly gay teammates) straight athletes feign sexual interaction with gay athletes as a symbolic gesture of acceptance. Pretending to fuck a gay male friend is, ironically, a way of saying, "I'm straight, but I celebrate your difference."

Whereas some might interpret this as a mechanism of re/inscribing heterosexual power, or a mild form of homophobia, the gay male athletes on this team do not feel this way, nor do the straight male athletes articulate it as such. In McCormack's (2011) typology of homosexually themed language, it would be classified as a form of 'pro-gay language.'

It is with this background that we examine how heterosexual male players perceive they would feel about not only a teammate coming out, but how gay banter would be affected.

Methods

This research concerns a very specific group of heterosexual male academy level soccer players from a Premier League professional football team of high repute. Many of the athletes have played for this club, and in some cases have transferred from other clubs, from a very young age. After every season, all players undergo a rigorous selection process, with numerous players 'let go' if they are deemed 'not good enough'. At present, they play in the national Under 18 Premier League, the top level of football which young men of this age can compete.

Access to interview these players was granted after approaching the Academy education manager. We explained that we were interested in recent comments in the press speculating upon the likelihood of a gay player being accepted by high profile people in the men's game, like former player Gareth Southgate and current player Anders Lindegaard, and that we wanted to get a sense of attitudes inside the locker room to explore these statements.

Participants

Participants are aged between 16 and 18, but few were 16. Eighteen of the players are white and four Black. All identify as heterosexual in interview, and again indicated so when we asked them to locate their sexuality on a Likert scale. The players identify as lower to upper-

working class, and their parent's occupation was asked to confirm this. Thus, this research

contributes to a growing body of work on working class men and their inclusion of

homosexuality in Britain (McCormack, 2013; Roberts 2012).

Players were interviewed intermittently by the three authors over a four-month period between

November 2012 and February 2013. In spreading the interviews out, it was hoped that it would

help prevent master narratives from being produced among the players, who might conceivably

talk to their teammates about the interview. Adding to this, the players were interviewed during

the hour of the day where they have tutorials with teachers. Thus, we interviewed students

without their peers knowing what was occurring.

Researcher Reflexivity

All three researchers are sociology of sport scholars, two British and one American. The

British scholars (aged 34 and 23) are both heterosexual football fans. They were able to bond

with students through discussions of the sport, building their capital with the participants.

Neither of these two overtly stated their heterosexuality, but the operation of a heterosexist

culture dictates that they were likely understood as such. The American researcher (aged 45)

built capital with the participants in answering their questions as to what brought him to the UK,

by answering that he was recruited as a sport scholar. He did not, however, tell the participants

that he was gay; so it is likely that they also assumed him to be heterosexual.

Procedures

We conducted 22 semi-structured topically-focused in-depth interviews. While the

interviews ranged between 20 and 60 minutes, they averaged 25 minutes. After using buffing

questions the interview shifted to examine for homosocial aspects of inclusive masculinities,

before asking about hypothetical questions concerning their attitudes toward a teammate coming out as gay.

These questions included asking the players about how the outing of a gay teammate would affect locker-room situations, homosocial banter, bed-sharing, and having a gay friend as a roommate. Participants were also asked to imagine that their best friend asked them to give a best-man speech at his gay wedding, and about attitudes toward gay marriage. They were asked hypothetical situations about seeing a gay teammate being harassed for being gay, whether this differed if the player was his best friend, or least favorite teammate, and what they would do about the bullying, if anything. Players were asked about how they would feel if a gay teammate was sexually and romantically attracted to them, and whether they worried others might think they were gay for having a gay friend/teammate.

Ethics

All ethical procedures recommended by the British Sociological Association have been followed. This includes participant rights to view transcripts (none did), the right to withdrawal (none did) and making anonymous both the participants' names, the name of their academy and their geographical location. Players were provided with an information sheet with the investigators contact information, aims of the study, and indication that there was no penalty for not participating. Players were not influenced by the academy in any capacity that we can determine, and we secured access through the educational component of their academy existence in the form of a teacher, not a coach.

Analysis

After transcribing the interviews, the players' narratives were coded for themes relating to their views about their relationship to homosexuality and sport, and their perception of their teammates' relationship to homosexuality, homophobia, and sport. Our coding was also generated from themes documented in research notes after each interview. Sharing of these post-interview notes served as a mechanism of inter-rater co-verifying of themes, and there was little, if any, inconsistency among researchers.

Limitations

The results of this research cannot be generalized to all academy players, though we can see no fundamental reason why young men from other British academies should significantly vary in their attitudes toward gay male athletes. Instead, this research gives us insight into the attitudinal disposition of young athletes who appear to be maintaining no attitudinal difference to non-elite athletes of their cohort that is being found among various demographic groups of young men from across the United Kingdom (McCormack, 2012; Roberts, 2012).

These findings are however limited to the interviewee's speculation only. Players' accounts of how they perceive they would act toward the outing of a teammate are, perhaps, roadmaps toward actual behaviors, but we cannot guarantee that their desired narratives would be actualized. Fortunately, previous research (Adams and Anderson, 2012) on the same demographic of young men (in this case playing soccer for an American university) found relative results. In interviewing players about their perceptions of how their team would treat a gay player, and then being in the research field when their teammate actually came out, actions were upgraded, not downgraded compared to what the athletes thought would happen.

Results

Not Having Gay Friends

This is a somewhat unique group of 16-18 year-old males to study concerning youth perspectives on gay men. About half of these men have never met, or even known of a sexual minority, apart from those they see on television. John says, "No. I've never met one in person." Edward says, "I know some from tele', but not like in person." Others knew of gay males through their former schooling, but few, apart from Jake, had a gay friend that with whom they socialized.

It is hard to determine, empirically, whether these men know fewer gay males than a comparable group of youth their age. Still, we hypothesize that due to the confines of academy life these footballers might be disadvantaged in the opportunity to befriend gay males personally, especially as 16-19 appears to be a common coming out age in the United Kingdom (Riley, 2010). Accordingly, by the time most youth are coming out in college or sixth forms (the equivalent of American high schools), these men have already been sequestered into a football academy; one that removes them not only from their schools, but to a large extent from their local communities.

The other half of the players we interviewed maintained only very loose social connections to gay males. While one had a bisexual sister, the rest knew of a gay guy from school, or had a gay relative that they did not have regular direct contact with. But, apart from one, these men have not had the benefit of social contact and face-to-face interaction with a gay male, which research has shown to be the most important socializing agent into a gay-friendly disposition (Herek and Capitanio, 1996).

If a Teammate Were to Come Out

Evidence from the men sampled spoke loudly and consistently toward support of homosexuality in football, even where the men used few words to illustrate their beliefs.

It is perhaps easier for researchers to measure homophobia than to investigate whatever might be the opposite of homophobia. We can ask questions about why the participant dislikes gays, but for the latter we are limited in probing questions. Efforts to get rich, descriptive data—the kind we hope to provide with this qualitative research—oftentimes fail when one asks about positives.

Furthermore, the age of these informants, combined with their simplistic yet positive perspective on homosexuality oftentimes made getting at rich and detailed quotes difficult. We were met with a lot of short-word answers to our questions. But this should not deter from the validity of the findings.

When Callum, for example, was asked how he would feel if his best friend came out as gay, he replied, "It's whatever" indicating that he had no issues with it. When another was asked what issues he would have if his roommate came out as gay, he said, "None." Thus, although it may not be a lengthy justification of one's attitude, there is nonetheless a powerful message to be heard when a 17 year-old footballer is asked what difference it would make if his best friend came out as gay and he simply says, "None."

Charles was asked about how he would feel if his best friend were to come out as gay. He replied, "Yeah, that's fine. Not a problem." When asked to imagine his best friend coming out, James said that, "It would make no difference whatsoever. I would be fine with it." This answer was repeated when we asked about whether it would make a difference if his best friend at the academy came out. "No. No difference." He was asked if it would make a difference in terms of

being a player on his team. "No." Because James lives with his best friend at the academy, we questioned as to whether James's sharing a room with his best academy friend would make him uncomfortable. "Of course not," he answered, looking at the researcher like he had just asked yet another stupid question.

It was this type of interaction that we heard, repeatedly. When asked how he would feel if his best friend came out of the closet as gay, Harry said, "It wouldn't make a difference…. I wouldn't mind. I'm too laid-back to care really." When asked if he would change anything if his best friend were to come out, Oliver said, "No. I don't think I would." Edward answered, "No. Not really."

When asked the same question Jake answered, "I would support him. I wouldn't have anything against him because he's gay. I've got a gay mate back home. I would definitely support him." And Joe said, "It wouldn't really change anything. Dunno. It's not like it changes him as a person. Being gay doesn't change that. A homophobic [sic] wouldn't like it. But I wouldn't care."

Collectively, none of the men on the team said that if their best friend on the team, or their best friend from back home, were to come out of the closet, it would fundamentally alter their friendship. Not one of the players interviewed said that if their roommate were to come out that they would not want to room with them anymore, and not one of the players expressed fears over either sharing a bed with their teammate or having others think that they were gay for being their best mate—indicating an organizational culture free of homohysteria. Thus, this was a group of young men that were either explicitly supportive in their response, like Jake, or men who didn't feel they needed to articulate their support beyond stating that they wouldn't care.

Another important aspect to this research is that, unlike previous research on the men of a U.S. soccer team (Anderson, 2011c), the athletes on this team mostly did not think that their teammates' would have a problem with a gay teammate, saying as Oliver did, "Nobody on the team would care if someone was gay." Jake (the only player with a close gay friend) however, said, "It might be a few people, and that might be just where they are brought up. There is gonna be someone who has a problem, but we'd ignore that guy." Still, Jake could not speculate which of his teammates would.

As researchers used to examining social issues from a critical perspective we, of course, did not end our questioning with these initial responses. In response to criticism on other research projects of this nature, we pushed our questions broader, asking about how the players would react if their best friend said that they were in love with him, or just sexually attracted to him, or both. We also measured just how inclusive these men were by asking them where they stood on gay marriage, and whether or not they—as a potential future professional player— would be the best man at a gay friend's wedding, in front of the press.

Proving Support

In order to more fully interrogate the depth of gay-inclusivity among these academy players, we questioned them about hypotheticals that we thought might bring a less-inclusive response. These could be classified into two types: one, a set of questions asked about whether their friendship would be negatively altered if the player's hypothetical best gay friend was in love, or was sexually attracted to him, or both; and two, a set of questions related to civil liberties and how intent these players were to stand up for them (i.e., marriage and freedom from bullying).

Concerning sexual feelings, James said that:

> Of course, I'd find it difficult if he had feelings for me. Not just that he's attracted but that
> he was in love with me. That would be difficult. But if he's gay and he's got a boyfriend
> and whatnot I don't see why it would make any difference.

Despite recognizing that it would be difficult if his best friend who was, hypothetically, both sexually and romantically attracted to James, he insists the friendship would remain strong. James told the researchers that this would be no more difficult than it would be if a "female mate" said the same thing. When asked how it would change matters specifically, he answered: "I wouldn't be fully comfortable because it might change the way I show support for him, but I don't really know." Even in this discussion, however, James was clear to identify that his actions and the change to his potential behaviors were equally designed to protect his gay best friend's feelings. "I might have to move out of the room depending on how it goes. I wouldn't want to keep him in a place where he is always seeing/wanting me, because I'm straight, and if he's not going to have me that might be hard for him." James added, "But we'd work through it." James was also keen to point out that gay men are not attracted to *all* men and that chances are his best friend would not be overly attracted to him. Or that, "He would get over it."

John said, "I would have to tell him that I don't feel the same way, but it wouldn't change anything." And when asked the same question Oliver responded:

> It would be weird. I would take a step back and tell him, 'No. I'm not gay and that.' I
> think the friendship would change a bit, if he tells you that he likes you it would be weird
> a bit. It's the same with girls, it would change a bit. It doesn't matter who fancies you, it
> changes the nature of the relationship a bit.

When asked how he would handle his best mate both physically and romantically fancying him, John said, "I would have to be put into the situation to properly know, but if I think about, I think it would be the same." He indicated that he would be sure to tell his friend that he's straight, so as "not to give him the wrong impression," but that apart from that, it would not alter his living or socializing arrangements.

We also asked these players about how the coming out to a teammate or friend would alter situations involving homosocial nudity, both in the locker room and at home. For example, Alex shows that there currently exists comfort in being nude around other males, even in close quarters:

> The other day I was in the shower [at home] and my mate says, 'I've got to quickly wash my hair and get to seminar.' So he just hopped in the shower and washed his hair whilst I was in there.

When asked if he would have been equally comfortable doing this if his best mate was gay he answered, "Well, if he's just come out to me now, he's seen me naked a million times already hadn't he?" Others showed a bit more hesitation about nudity. Oliver said that he would not move out of the room, or significantly alter the way he interacts with his best friend. "I'd still be happy for him to lean his head on my shoulder," he laughed, and speculated with a lack of certainty, as if to say that this is the only possible way matters might change between him and his best mate, "Maybe I'd cover up a bit more coming out of the shower!?"

Support for Social and Civil Equality

Support for gay teammates also came through both the acceptance of gay marriage, and the willingness of these men to give a best-man's speech at a gay wedding. This was even the

case among the (only) two players who were personally opposed to homosexuality on religious grounds; they still supported their social and civil equality.

All of the men in this study said that they supported gay marriage, which was being debated in parliament at the time of the study. Most of the men immediately offered their support with the expression 'of course' to indicate their belief, but a few took a more neutral political approach. One said:

> Gay marriage doesn't affect me so I'm not going to be strong for or strongly against it. But I think that for those it does affect is going to make a good difference in their life. It's going to make a world of difference for them and make them feel like they fit into society more.

Perhaps most interestingly were the beliefs of two players (one Black and one white) who showed the most reservation with homosexuality. Despite hearing from Jamal that it would make no difference if his best friend were to come out, he still maintained that homosexuality was wrong. "My parents are from Uganda and so I've been taught that homosexuality is wrong." However, Jamal grew up in England, where he has seen support for homosexuality among his peers. So when asked about whether he supports gay marriage, he contemplated it for a while and answered, "I'd probably vote for it to be honest. Because it's their lives, and it's up to them."

This same concept of civil liberty was taken by the other individual on the team who showed the most antipathy towards homosexuality. It was only after declaring that it would make "no difference" should his best mate come out as gay, that he later said he considers himself devoutly religious and that, "God created Adam and Eve and not Adam and Steve." But he was still not sure that he would vote no to gay marriage. When asked to imagine he was the deciding

vote on gay marriage he initially said no, "Because I wouldn't want everybody to start turning gay." He was asked how gay marriage would lead to people turning gay and answered, "More people would open up, and when people open up things become normal and when things become normal more people will become it." When asked what he thinks makes people gay he said, "I don't have a clue." It was only after the discussion moved away from gay marriage, and onto gay bullying, that he came back to the gay marriage question (of his own accord). "If it makes them happy, it makes them happy. Let them do what they want to do." "So you are now voting yes?" he was asked. "Yes," he said, without pressure from the interviewer.

When it came to players imagining how they would react if their best mate, who came out as gay, wanted to get married seven years from now when the participant was a 'big-time premiership football player' all of the men, but one, instantly responded affirmatively. This was the case even though they were told that the press would be there to report to the nation about their speech. While most just indicated their support the way Jake did, saying, "I wouldn't have a problem with that," or as Oliver said, "I'd do that. Yeah," others gave more excited responses.

James said, "That would be lovely." John said, "I'd like to give a little speech." Alex said, with a wide smile, that he'd give the speech, but that, "There would be a lot of gay jokes in the speech." Harry was the only player to show hesitance to this question. He sat quiet for a moment, before saying, "I don't know." This seemed odd compared to his previous pro-gay responses. It was thus only after further discussion that it was learned that his hesitation has nothing to do with the fact that it would be a gay wedding; instead, it was everything to do with the fact that he doesn't think he could give a good address. "I don't like public speaking." Still,

he said, that he would be 'happy' to clarify to the press that he maintains positive views about homosexuality.

Finally, in order to show social support for homosexuality, the players were asked about how they would act/react if their least favorite friend on the team were to come out of the closet, and then shortly thereafter he witnessed the gay athlete being bullied in the locker room by other teammates for being gay. All said that they would intervene. Charles said:

> Yes, because you know it's not his fault. I mean it's not his choice that he's gay. It has nothing to do whether I like the guy or not, it's just that being bullied for being gay that's not right, that's not on.

Even Jamal said, "Well it's not about whether I like him or not is it? It's about what's right."

The Influence of Homosexuality on Homosocial Banter

Young men's lives are highly organized by relations among men, particularly in terms of establishing their sexual identities (Bird, 1996). As with other research into homogenous groups of men, there was one social arena that our participants thought having a gay best friend, or teammate, would alter their heteromasculine culture. It concerns homosocial 'gay banter,' something of which the players tell us occurs frequently.

The athletes say that hotel-room banter (i.e. away games) normally revolves around feigned sexual attraction for one another. John said, "There's a lot of hitting bums and stuff in showers and a lot of sarcastic banter [mock gay sex]." Others talk about 'flicking' another guy's balls, and still others discuss grabbing the waist of a teammate and bending him over to mock fuck him. Believing the purpose of this type of banter is to ironically use mock-gay sex to

proclaim heterosexuality while simultaneously flirting with homosexuality, we asked about how the presence of a real homosexual might interfere with this behavior.

"I think that it may change because obviously they may find offense." John elaborated:

I don't know how it would work, because part of the banter thing is jumping all over [pretending to have sex with] someone who doesn't want to be jumped all over. But if the guy wants that, then it sort of takes the fun away from it.

Daniel also worried about possibly upsetting his hypothetical gay mate:

There would be certain things I wouldn't do to that mate, like I wouldn't think about it if were just having a laugh. I just wouldn't want to give him the wrong impression, that's all. I just wouldn't want to hurt him if you know what I mean?

Banter, of course, occurs not only in hotel rooms and locker rooms, but also between two friends in the digs (room) that they share at the academy. When discussing how he would operate living in the same room as a gay player, Harry was asked if he would be worried at all. He said, "Obviously the banter would be different if he's gay." Alex articulated why he also feels the banter might change:

I might think about it afterwards and think like 'what did he think about it.' I think I would try to act the same physically and stuff, but in my head it's always going to be, 'what he's thinking.' Whether he's taking it seriously or thinking it's a joke. I just don't know how the physical stuff would go - boys don't do that [banter] with girls, do they?

Alex therefore hypothesized that the relationship would change because, "That's one thing about your friends, is you don't worry about what they're thinking about what's said or how I would act. But I'd have to see if it goes well."

Still, Alex highlights that the relationship might improve in other aspects. Along with several other players he suggested that a byproduct of a teammate coming out might be increased emotional cohesion. "He is still my best friend and everything. It might make us closer for a bit because he just told me something so personal."

Joe says that the feigned gay banter would continue but that it would just be different. He suggests that the player might get more mock gay sex than before he came out.

> If someone sticks out a bit they are going to be a focus of banter, we'd just have something to make fun of….I'd probably banter with him even more, now that I have something to take the piss out of.

Joe clarifies, "You know what I mean by that?" he asks the interviewer. "Like, have fun with, not bully."

While most players suspected that the presence of an openly gay player would change the nature of their banter, in not wanting to send the gay player a wrong message, or seem offensive, Charles highlights that discomfort could run the other way, too. "I might feel uncomfortable if he took the banter too far [meaning made feigned sexual advances toward him]." In other words, Charles wonders where the line is between mock sexual interest expressed from a gay teammate toward himself (gay banter) and honest sexual desire being played out.

When asked how he would handle the situation if he felt that his gay teammate was doing it more for his own sexual thrill than 'gay banter,' he said, "I would make a joke about it at first, but if he didn't get it then I get irritated and have to tell him [to stop]." The interviewer asked whether that would that be any different to what it would be like if it was a girl making

unwelcome advances, "No," he responded, "Except I wouldn't want to hurt my best mate's feelings now, would I?"

Discussion

With this research, we set out to explore the attitudes of the next generation of professional British football players. We wanted to know how accepting straight players would be of a gay athlete on their team, and how they would view matters if the individual to come out were their best friend, their roommate, or a man they shared the locker room showers with. We desired to know how far they carried their beliefs in civil rights for gay men, as well as whether they would intervene with gay bullying. Finally, we desired to know how the presence of a gay male would alter homosocial relations concerning homosexualized gay banter.

Without the ability to access the highest level of professional players, we examined those on the doorstep of premiership and subsequent levels of professional play. Fortunately, a gatekeeper provided access to a well-established football academy at a Premier League club with a reputation for advancing players to Premiership play. Here we were permitted to interview (without conditions) all of the members of their elite under 18's team.

Interview results were broadly consistent with other research on young British men of their age cohort (16-18) in that these men showed no overt animosity toward gay men, and inclusive attitudes toward the hypothetical situation of having a gay teammate, best friend or roommate reveal their sexuality (see McCormack, 2012). Results are clear: among the 22 future athletes we interviewed, they are unbothered by the issue of gays in sport.

Their acceptance is more complete than research a decade ago shows. The acceptance these young males articulate is not simply a matter of tolerating difference as young men used to.

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Whereas Anderson (2002) found gay male athletes accepted last decade only 'as long as one plays the sport well,' today's heterosexual male adolescent athletes offered unconditional acceptance of homosexuality. Even for the two men who maintained conservative Christian morals, both stood by the civil and social rights of gay men. They may have felt that homosexuality was not 'God's plan', but they would not alter their living arrangements with a gay teammate, and would all speak at his wedding.

One might also suggest that these answers simply reflect social desirability (a positive finding in itself), but we have no evidence of this. Instead, we take seriously our participants' disclosures of support for homosexuality—we are given no reason not to trust them. In addition to there being no counter-evidence to suggest homophobia, answers did not vary whether the young men were talking to the 45 year-old gay male researcher (who did not present as gay) the 34 year-old straight male researcher (who did not present as straight) or the 23 year-old straight male researcher (who did not present as straight). Furthermore, in post-research de-briefing, the gatekeeper confirms that, to his knowledge, these men represent a group of gay-friendly athletes. We therefore argue that the most striking finding in this research was that these men largely have little to no contact with gay men, but their dispositions were nonetheless inclusive.

We also highlight that in previous research, in which a teammate actually comes out, social conditions are upgraded from what players speculate (Adams and Anderson, 2012). In other words, matters are likely to be even better for a gay athlete on this team than these athletes speculate it would be.

Also significant to our finding of inclusivity among this group of men, is that half of the players did not maintain direct social contact with gay men. This is perhaps because the players

interviewed in this research live in a training camp where they interact almost exclusively with the other 21 players of their team. While they return home for occasional weekend visits, they are mostly removed from other social networks. Borrowing from Goffman's (1961) notion of a total-institution, Anderson (2005) calls this type of team, a near-total institution. In this academy, the boys' lives revolve around just those in the academy, there is little outside engagement. This then becomes a virtuous circle of decreasing friendship networks, and may explain why only one of the 22 players has a gay friend that he socializes with regularly. Thus, whereas youth this age are normally expanding their social networks, for these youths, such networks appear to be decreasing, or at least delimited.

It might therefore be seen as surprising that, for a group of males with no direct contact to gay men, and for a group of men that has traditionally been thought to exhibit highly homophobic attitudes (Wolf Wendel et al., 2001), not one of the 22 players we interviewed said that they would have significant issues if their best friend came out. Even those from religious backgrounds, or those whose parents' maintained highly homophobic views, did not think it would make a negative difference if their best friend or any other teammate came out. Without social contact with gay men, when asked how they grew to be so inclusive of homosexuality, they simply stated that they were just not homophobic.

However, it is more likely that McCormack's (2012) insight into the declining significances of homophobia is applicable here. He shows that media visibility has led to the unacceptability of homophobia for most young men in the UK today. Thus, there is reason to suspect that modern media would have had similar effect on other young men whose social networks are limited, apart from just those we studied. Exemplifying this, Bush et al. (2012)

show that when surveying young male athletes who have come from across the country to a highly-ranked sporting university, there existed very little homophobia upon entry, and none upon exit. They write (2012: 16), "…Results of this research make it clear that it is no longer sociologically responsible to generalize all sports, and all men who play them as homophobic. Increasingly, it appears to be the opposite."

Although we are saying that this group of men would have no issues with a gay player—whether it be their best mate, or least-favorite teammate—we recognize that we cannot statistically generalize this finding to all academy players of this age across the country—declining homophobia is an uneven social process. It is also important to note that elite football in England has also witnessed a large-scale increase in the number of overseas players (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2008), meaning that only a small number of the young men in our sample will play at this level. Premiership football culture is influenced by more than just British values.

Also, this research does not suggest what experience an actual openly gay player would have in professional football. This research might not reflect what might occur for openly gay men of other demographics (in recreational or professional teams), either. Furthermore, these results do not predict what will happen when gay men come out to their sporting teams in other locales, as individuals make informed choices about coming out of the closet after assessing their local culture's level of homophobia; choices that also consider their support network and human sporting and masculine capital (Anderson, 2005).

The absence of homophobia in this research also does not mean there is an absence of heterosexism. One way heterosexism emerges in this research concerns the ironic juxtaposition

of heterosexualized 'gay banter.' Here, athletes feared that the coming out of a gay teammate would alter this homosocial arena. The athletes we interviewed were largely afraid that such banter might be insulting to a gay teammate, whilst others worried that the gay teammate might somatically enjoy the feigned gay sex. And while these men articulate their feelings for gay banter for the hypothetical situation, it is also important to remember that a number of them stated that they did not know how matters would change, that it is hard to say without being in the situation.

However, when the issue of gay banter has previously been examined, by conducting ethnography on a university soccer team, during and after an openly gay player came out to the team, the researchers heard identical fears about the altering of banter in the presence of a gay teammate (Adams and Anderson, 2012). Nonetheless, as other gay male athletes also confirm (Anderson, 2011b), it was found that the gay men not only continued to be part of the banter, but that their homosexuality also added a new element of banter, enhancing and promoting team culture.

We conclude by suggesting that the hypothetical inclusivity the men we interviewed for this research articulate, serves as a roadmap for when one of their teammates actually does come out. Something we suspect research on Robbie Rogers would confirm.

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