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Author(s): Danny Osborne and William E. Wagner, III

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# EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HOMOPHOBIA AND PARTICIPATION IN CORE SPORTS AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

DANNY OSBORNE

*University of California, Los Angeles*

WILLIAM E. WAGNER, III

*California State University, Channel Islands*

**ABSTRACT:** *This article assesses the relationship between participation in extracurricular activities and homophobia in a population of high school students. During their transition from junior high to high school, participants (N = 1,470) completed a series of phone interviews that included questions regarding homosexuality. Logistic regressions on these data indicated that males who participated in core sports (e.g., football, baseball, basketball, and/or soccer) were nearly three times more likely than individuals who did not participate in core sports to express homophobic attitudes ( $\beta = 2.967$ ,  $p < .10$ ). Conversely, females who participated in nonathletic extracurricular activities (e.g., debate club, science club) were half as likely as individuals who did not participate in nonathletic extracurricular activities to express homophobic attitudes ( $\beta = 0.599$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Future studies should focus on the rigid masculine/heterosexist identity that is perpetuated in core sports. Keywords: homophobia; sport; high school; extracurricular activities; athlete*

Homophobia—the negative thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviors an individual has in response to others who are perceived to be gay or lesbian—has become an endemic social problem within our educational system. Gay and lesbian students report incidences of verbal and physical abuse on many college campuses (D’Augelli 1989, 1992; Herek 1993). This creates an essential culture of fear within the university setting for many of the nation’s sexual minority youth. Further illustrating the pervasiveness of homophobia on college campuses is the candidness with which college students discuss their transgressions; many heterosexual college students openly admit to committing acts of violence against individuals whom they suspect are gay or lesbian (Franklin 2000). Intolerance toward the gay

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Address all correspondence to: Danny Osborne, Department of Psychology, University of California, Los Angeles, 1285 Franz Hall, 502 Portola Plaza, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1563; phone: (213) 365-0709; e-mail: dannyosborne@ucla.edu.

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and lesbian community also affects professors. Students who are led to believe that a professor is gay rate the professor's performance lower than students who are led to believe that the same professor is heterosexual, a phenomenon that occurs despite the fact that students watch the same performance (Osborne et al. 2007). Empirical studies such as these suggest that homophobia is a pervasive problem in our nation's schools.

Despite recent evidence of a slightly liberalizing trend in attitudes toward gays and lesbians (e.g., Yang 1997), there is reason to believe that homophobia will continue to be a problem within our society. Research has shown that high school students have higher levels of homophobia than college students (Van de Ven 1994). In fact, the majority of teens in a recent nationally representative sample reported that they would not befriend an individual who was gay (Marsiglio 1993). Additional research has found that teenagers in Spain are unreceptive to the idea of extending basic civil rights to individuals who are gay (Sotelo 2000). The hope that attitudes toward individuals who are gay or lesbian will improve with time is unrealistically optimistic, as these studies imply that homophobia is deeply instilled in the new generation of young people. Research must be done to find the roots of these intolerant attitudes.

This brings us to our basic question: What are some of the underlying variables that are associated with increased levels of homophobia among some high school students? Because considerable financial resources are devoted to the public educational system, as well as the fact that the nation's youth spend a considerable amount of time in school, an investigation into the school structures that may—or may not—be associated with increased levels of homophobia is well justified. The time children spend in school, as well as the fact that the norms enacted by highly visible students infiltrate the basic student culture (Eder and Parker 1987), implies that some of the homophobic beliefs displayed by the nation's youth are learned—or at least allowed to persist through tacit acceptance—in school. As such, homophobic attitudes can be counteracted once these problematic structures are identified. Therefore, the current investigation will attempt to locate these structures by investigating the relationship between sports participation and the holding of a homophobic belief system.

### **Impact of Homophobia**

Given the evidence documenting the existence of homophobia in our school system (D'Augelli 1989, 1992; Franklin 2000; Herek 1993; Marsiglio 1993; Van de Ven 1994), it is reasonable to expect that the high school experience will have negative consequences for many students who identify as gay or lesbian. Russell, Seif, and Truong (2001) conducted a study with a nationally representative sample of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth and found results consistent with this assumption. Males who are bisexual suffer academically and are more likely than students who are gay, lesbian, or heterosexual to have trouble at school (i.e., failing to do homework, not paying attention in class, and experiencing interpersonal troubles). Additionally, students who are lesbian are more likely to have negative feelings toward school and have slightly lower grades than their heterosexual

counterparts. Homophobia can have a detrimental impact on the educational experience of many adolescents who belong to the sexual minority.

In addition to the problems in school many sexual minority youth encounter (most likely attributable to the intense homophobia faced within the educational setting), adolescents who are gay or lesbian experience many psychological consequences as a result of growing up in a homophobic society. Gay and lesbian adolescents, when compared with their heterosexual counterparts, report higher feelings of loneliness (Martin and D'Augelli 2003), presumably a result of their marginalized status within their high schools. Not surprisingly, adolescents who are gay or lesbian also have higher levels of substance abuse than their heterosexual counterparts (Garofalo et al. 1998; for a review, see Jordan 2000). Even more troubling is the finding that the rates of suicide contemplation among adolescents who are gay or lesbian are as high as 42 percent (e.g., see Hershberger and D'Augelli 1995). Unfortunately, gay and lesbian youth are also likely to act on these thoughts; gay and lesbian youth are two to three times more likely to commit suicide than their heterosexual peers (Gibson, as cited in Ben-Ari and Gil 1998; Faulkner and Cranston 1998). Homophobia can have a devastating psychological impact on individuals who identify as gay or lesbian.

There is also reason to believe that homophobia has serious consequences for students who are not gay or lesbian. Kimmel and Mahler's (2003) recent examination of the high school shootings in the United States in the past twenty years illustrates this point. In their analysis, Kimmel and Mahler found that nearly all of the students who committed a school shooting in the past twenty years had endured intense harassment that included insults questioning their sexual orientation. Although there are clearly additional sociological, political, and psychological variables at play in the recent wave of school shootings (Kimmel and Mahler note that twenty-four of the twenty-eight school shootings took place in states or counties that vote conservatively), the theme of homophobia that runs through most of these stories suggests that the antipathy toward high school students who are gay or lesbian can have a devastating impact on individuals outside of the gay and lesbian community. Exploring the institutional variables associated with homophobia is an endeavor that has implications for everyone interested in making our schools a better place.

### **Gender and Homophobia**

What are some of the individual-level variables associated with increased levels of homophobia? One of the most readily apparent findings that emerge when looking at homophobia is the difference in levels of homophobia between males and females. Males have consistently been shown to have more intolerant attitudes toward gays and lesbians than do females (Bierly 1985; Heaven and Oxman 1999; Kite 1984). This finding has been replicated in numerous countries, including Canada (Morrison, Parriag, and Morrison 1999), Turkey (Sakalli 2002), and the United States (Herek 2000). Not surprisingly, males are also more likely than females to behave aggressively toward individuals who are gay or lesbian (Franklin 2000), even when the transgressor is low in hypermasculinity (Whitley 2001).

Any study addressing homophobia should look at differences between males and females.

In addition to basic sex differences, it is possible that specific beliefs about traditional gender roles could influence attitudes toward individuals who are gay or lesbian. Consistent with this assumption, a recent meta-analysis indicated that belief in traditional gender roles is correlated with higher levels of homophobia (Whitley 2001). Additionally, research has suggested that there is a positive relationship between measures of sexism and homophobia; the more sexist one is, the more likely the individual is homophobic (Campbell, Schellenberg, and Senn 1997; Morrison et al. 1999; Sakalli 2002). This implies that institutions promoting traditional constructions of masculinity may be environments under which homophobia is free to develop.

### Extracurricular Activities

One potential area to begin addressing the structural variables associated with increased levels of homophobia is the extracurriculum (i.e., activities such as organized athletics, academic clubs, and other such programs that are not part of the required high school curriculum). Because individuals who participate in highly visible extracurricular activities (e.g., football and baseball) have a substantial influence on the values and culture of their entire student body (see Eder and Parker 1987), exploring the possibility that some of these extracurricular activities promote—or at least do nothing to decrease the levels of—homophobia in the high school offers researchers the potential to produce practical and insightful findings. Most of the studies looking at the extracurriculum, however, have neglected the possibility that these structures promote homophobia. Instead, researchers have traditionally focused on the benefits associated with participation in extracurricular activities, producing findings that are worth noting. Students who are at risk of dropping out of high school are more likely to complete their education if they participate in extracurricular activities than if they do not participate in extracurricular activities (Mahoney and Cairns 1997). Likewise, participation in extracurricular activities is associated with higher grade point averages and higher competence and social skills ratings from teachers (Fletcher, Nickerson, and Wright 2003). Furthermore, individuals who participate in extracurricular activities have higher levels of satisfaction with their school than individuals who do not participate in extracurricular activities (Gilman 2001), possibly explaining their higher rates of school completion. Participation in the extracurriculum offers students a variety of benefits, both social and academic.

Although we are not attempting to negate these beneficial aspects of the extracurriculum, we believe that there may be instances in which participation in extracurricular activities lead to deleterious consequences. Specifically, participation in certain aspects of the extracurriculum may be associated with increased levels of homophobia. This position is based on previous research suggesting that extracurricular activities offer students different types of messages concerning socially unacceptable behaviors. Individuals who participate in extracurricular activities that emphasize the performing arts and/or prosocial community

involvement (e.g., drama club, volunteer and community service, and/or church attendance) are less likely to engage in risky behaviors, whereas individuals who participate in athletic activities are more likely to abuse alcohol (Eccles and Barber 1999). In other words, different types of extracurricular activities provide students with differing messages about the acceptability of risky behaviors. This suggests that differences in levels of homophobia may also be found between individuals who participate in different aspects of the extracurriculum. A distinction must be made between the impact various types of extracurricular activities have on the development of homophobia.

### Sports and Homophobia

An obvious area to begin such a distinction is to separate nonathletic extracurricular activities from extracurricular activities involving sports. Given the connection between masculinity and athleticism (e.g., Messner 1990, 1992), it is no surprise that homophobia is prevalent in sports. In fact, sports are often conceptualized as an arena under which male athletes are able to maintain a masculine hegemony by derogating women and individuals who identify as gay or lesbian (Muir and Seitz 2004). Further connecting the theme of homophobia to participation in sports is the finding that adherence to a sports ideology—that is, a belief that sports offer individuals an outlet for moral development—is associated with increased levels of homophobia for males (Harry 1995). These themes, along with other observations, have lead theorists such as Messner to suggest that homophobia is one of the central agents used to construct male athletes' masculine identity. The institution of sport is a haven for the expression and possible development of homophobia.

Homophobia is also used in sports to control female athletes. Better female athletes are often stigmatized by being labeled *lesbians* (Higgs and Schell 1998), reflecting an obvious dichotomy between competence in sport and femininity. Not surprisingly, many female athletes avoid participating in sports for fear of being labeled a lesbian, a label that may be responsible for the lower levels of participation in sports for female athletes (Shakib 2003; Shakib and Dunbar 2002). The intense fear of being labeled a lesbian also leads female athletes to deceive others about their participation in sports (Blinde and Taub 1992). Homophobia is a problem within the arena of sport for both men and women.

Despite the previously mentioned research showing that there is a relationship between participation in athletics and homophobia, only a few studies have looked at this topic among high school athletes. Shakib (2003) found that female high school athletes are often labeled as lesbians for their involvement in sports. Likewise, Shakib and Dunbar (2002) reported that such stigmatization may explain the reason why many female athletes drop out of sports during high school. Wagner and Osborne (2005), however, were unable to demonstrate that homophobia was more prevalent among high school athletes when compared to the rest of the student body.

How is it that the extant literature shows a connection between homophobia and sports participation (e.g., Harry 1995; Higgs and Schell 1998) yet the same

relationship has been elusive in previous research looking at high school students? One possible suggestion is that not all sports are created equal. That is, some athletic activities may be more effective at communicating gender roles that prescribe hegemonic masculinity than others. Therefore, researchers must attempt to separate these sports from other, more benign, athletic activities. This will help establish a realistic and theoretically sound assessment of the impact that participation in some sports has on the development—or at least the expression of—homophobia.

An area to begin this distinction is to separate core sports from periphery sports. For the current study, core sports refer to athletic activities that define the schools' athletic extracurriculum and have become institutionalized within the culture of the high school. In the case of our sample population, these are clearly football, baseball, basketball, and soccer. These activities espouse hegemonic masculinity, thereby perpetuating strict conformity to traditional gender roles among their participants. Additionally, the public regularly attends these sporting events, whereas some of the less visible athletic activities (e.g., tennis and swimming) do not receive as much attention. As a result of the combination of hegemonic masculinity and visibility within the school community, the institution of core sports creates a highly structured and visible norm of masculinity for its participants. This should be manifested in higher levels of homophobia among core sport athletes when compared with the rest of the student body. By separating core sports from some of the periphery athletic activities such as tennis and swimming, it may be possible to find a connection between homophobia and participation in athletics. This will ultimately shed light on the previously elusive relationship between homophobia and sports participation, providing researchers with a more accurate and refined assessment of the problem.

### **The Current Study**

The current study addresses homophobia within the high school setting by assessing the relationship between participation in extracurricular activities and the expression of homophobic attitudes within a population of high school students. Given the research suggesting that athletics is a social institution effective at constructing masculine identities (see Messner 1990, 1992), as well as the a priori assessment that football, baseball, basketball, and soccer constitute the primary athletic endeavors through which such a construction occurs, it is predicted that participation in core sports (i.e., football, baseball, basketball, and/or soccer) will be associated with higher rates of homophobia. Conversely, individuals who participate in nonathletic extracurricular activities (e.g., debate, forensics, science clubs) will be less likely to express homophobic attitudes. Additionally, given the previously mentioned research suggesting that males are more intolerant of gays and lesbians than are females (Bierly 1985; Heaven and Oxman 1999; Herek 2000; Kite 1984; Sakalli 2002), we expect that high school males in the current study will be more likely to hold homophobic beliefs than their female counterparts. Finally, school variables such as the population and ethnic diversity of the high school will be included to control for alternative explanations, while simultaneously

allowing us to explore additional social structures that may or may not be associated with increased levels of homophobia among high school students. It is hoped that the current investigation will add to the extant literature by documenting a relationship between the aforementioned variables and homophobia. This will ultimately contribute to the discussion about changes in school policies that are needed to reduce levels of intolerance toward high school students who are gay or lesbian.

## **METHOD**

### **Data**

Data come from the Philadelphia Educational Longitudinal Study (PELS), a data set consisting of a random sample of 1,470 students (733 males, 737 females) attending public schools in the Philadelphia school district during the 1995–1996 school year. The ethnic composition of the Philadelphia area is well reflected in the PELS data set, as a majority of the participants identified themselves as African American (61 percent). The remaining participants identified themselves as white (24 percent), Hispanic (8 percent), Asian American (2 percent), or Other (1 percent). A small percentage of participants (5 percent) reported that they did not know their ethnicity.

The PELS was conducted primarily through three waves of telephone interviews with students and their parents, commencing during the summer of the students' transition from junior high to high school in 1996. Data from this first wave consisted of retrospective accounts of the students' experiences during the eighth grade as well as their expectations about high school. The second wave of data collections occurred in September 1996, immediately following the beginning of the students' first term of high school. The retention rate for these follow-up interviews was 77 percent. Interviews for this wave were conducted to assess students' experiences with their transition to high school and included questions concerning students' coursework, friendships, and engagement in extracurricular activities. The final wave of the PELS retained 70 percent of the original respondents. The questions asked during this wave consisted mostly of questions used in the first two waves of interviews but also included additional items that are not relevant for the present investigation. In addition to the questions directly obtained from the participants, information concerning the diversity of the schools was collected from the Philadelphia school district. This information largely focused on the racial and ethnic composition of the schools at which the participants attended and are used as control variables in the current study.

### **Materials**

Select items derived from the PELS data set that addressed attitudes toward homosexuality were used as proxies for homophobia in the current study. Demographic and school variables of theoretical importance were used as independent variables. These items were also derived from the PELS data set.



### ***Measure of Homophobia***

Four yes/no questions concerning attitudes toward homosexuality were used as proxies for homophobia in the current study. The first item asked participants whether they would be upset if they saw "people putting down gay and lesbian students" (reverse-scored). The second item asked participants whether they would feel uncomfortable in the presence of an individual who was known to be gay or lesbian. The third item asked participants whether they felt individuals should be "sent to jail for beating up gays" (reverse-scored). The fourth item asked participants whether they would remain close to a friend after finding out that he or she was gay or lesbian (reverse-scored). "Yes" responses were assigned a value of 1, and a composite measure was created with values ranging from 0 (indicating no homophobia) to 4 (indicating extreme homophobia). The data were then reduced to a dichotomous variable with 0 indicating that the participant did not respond to any of the items in a homophobic manner and 1 indicating that the participant responded to one or more of the questions in a homophobic manner. This was done to conform to the normative practices associated with binary logistic regressions, the primary method of statistical analyses used in the current investigation.

### ***Independent Variables***

Five items from the PELS data set were transformed into dummy variables and used as independent variables for the current study. The first item was ethnicity, dichotomized into white/nonwhite (white: *white* = 1, *nonwhite* = 0). The second item was gender, dichotomized into male/female (male: *male* = 1, *female* = 0). The third item assessed whether the participant engaged in any athletic extracurricular activities during the school year (sports participation: *participation in any sports* = 1, *no participation in sports* = 0). The fourth item assessed whether the participant played any core sports (i.e., football, baseball, basketball, and/or soccer) during the school year (core sports: *participation in core sports* = 1, *no participation in core sports* = 0). The fifth item assessed whether the participant engaged in any nonathletic extracurricular activities (e.g., debate, forensics, science club) during the school year (extracurricular activity: *participation in nonathletic extracurricular activities* = 1, *no participation in nonathletic extracurricular activities* = 0).

### ***Control Variables***

Three additional items from the PELS data set were transformed into dummy variables and used as control variables for the current study. To differentiate between the influence of nonathletic extracurricular involvement and mere academic performance on homophobia, we needed to control for participants' performance in academic-related activities. The most relevant variable in the PELS data set addressing this issue is an item that assessed participants' standardized score on a mathematics exam taken prior to entering high school. This variable was dichotomized into scores falling above or below the 75th percentile (math score in 75th percentile: *math score at the 75th percentile or higher* = 1, *math score below the 75th percentile* = 0). Also important to an investigation on homophobia is

the amount of contact individuals have with people from diverse backgrounds. The PELS data set contains two items that address this point. The first of these items assessed whether the participant attended a school that had a population of 250 students or higher (big school: *attendance at a school with a population of 250 students or higher* = 1, *attendance at a school with a population lower than 250 students* = 0). The second of these items assessed whether the participant attended a school that had an ethnically diverse population, as indicated by the existence of two or more racial or ethnic groups in which the majority group does not exceed 80 percent of the entire student population (multiethnic school: *attendance at a multiethnic school* = 1, *attendance at a homogeneous school* = 0).

## RESULTS

Because we hypothesize that core sports are highly masculinized institutions, it is possible that males are more attracted to core sports than females. Indeed, chi-square test confirms this suspicion. Males were much more likely than females to participate in core sports,  $\chi^2(1) = 40.43, p < .01$ . Given the possible significance of males' selective attraction to core sports, it is important to do separate analyses based on gender. We have temporarily broken down our sample by gender to show the reader the mean levels of homophobia as a function of the given independent variable for males and females (see Table 1). Prior to applying this technique to our main hypotheses, however, we present the full analyses with gender included as an independent variable.

**TABLE 1**  
Mean Level of Homophobia for Each Independent Variable Broken Down By Gender

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Mean (0 to 1)</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>n</i>
<i>Male</i>			
White	.81 (.87)	.04 (.02)	98 (302)
Sports participation	.85 (.85)	.04 (.02)	99 (301)
Core sports	.88 (.85)	.04 (.02)	82 (318)
Extracurricular activities	.81 (.86)	.05 (.02)	62 (328)
Math score in 75th percentile	.79 (.87)	.04 (.02)	100 (300)
Big school	.86 (.85)	.03 (.02)	145 (255)
Multiethnic school	.85 (.86)	.03 (.02)	175 (225)
<i>Female</i>			
White	.53 (.74)	.05 (.02)	85 (346)
Sports participation	.67 (.70)	.05 (.02)	77 (354)
Core sports	.65 (.70)	.09 (.02)	26 (405)
Extracurricular activities	.59 (.73)	.05 (.02)	103 (328)
Math score in 75th percentile	.60 (.73)	.02 (.04)	117 (314)
Big school	.68 (.71)	.04 (.03)	161 (270)
Multiethnic school	.64 (.73)	.04 (.03)	165 (266)

*Note:* Values in parentheses represent the scores for participants who did not possess the given characteristic. Higher mean scores indicate higher levels of homophobia.

**TABLE 2**  
Odds Ratios for the Likelihood of Having Homophobic Beliefs

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Likelihood of Having Homophobic Beliefs</i>		
	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>
White	0.526***	0.562***	0.628**
Male	2.455***		
Sports participation	0.778	0.786	0.793
Core sports	1.369	1.805*	1.718
Extracurricular activity	0.633**	0.590***	0.601***
Math score in 75th percentile	0.659**	0.646**	0.650**
Big school	0.872	0.915	
Multiethnic school	1.140	1.198	
<i>n</i>	831	855	864
<i>df</i>	8	7	5
$\chi^2$	55.081	29.301	28.380
<i>p</i>	.000	.000	.000
<i>r</i> <sup>2</sup>	.097	.051	.049

\* $p < .10$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

Logistic regressions were computed by simultaneously regressing the dichotomized homophobia variable onto each of the independent variables. Table 2 displays these results. As shown in Model 1, males are nearly two and a half times more likely than females to express homophobic beliefs. Also worth noting is the impact ethnicity has on the expression of homophobic beliefs; whites are nearly half as likely as their nonwhite counterparts to express such attitudes. Participation in extracurricular activities had a similar effect; individuals who engaged in nonathletic extracurricular activities were 63.3 percent less likely than those who did not participate in nonathletic extracurricular activities to express homophobic beliefs. Not surprising, then, was the relationship between math scores and homophobia; those who scored in the 75th percentile or higher on a standardized math test were roughly half as likely as their peers to express homophobic beliefs.

Interestingly, the impact of participation in core sports does not reach a trend toward significance until we remove the sex variable from the full model. When doing so, individuals who participate in core sports are almost twice as likely as individuals who do not participate in core sports to express homophobic beliefs. The remaining variables displayed in Table 2 do not change much in Model 2, nor do any noteworthy changes occur when we remove the variables concerning the population and ethnic diversity of the schools the participants attend (the big school and multiethnic school variables, respectively; see Model 3).

To further explore the possible relationship between participation in core sports and the endorsement of homophobic beliefs, we conducted separate analyses split by sex. Table 3 shows these results. Males who participate in core sports are nearly three times as likely as their non-core-sport-participating counterparts to

**TABLE 3**  
Odds Ratios for the Likelihood of Having Homophobic Beliefs  
Split by Gender

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Likelihood of Having Homophobic Beliefs</i>	
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
White	0.679	0.436***
Sports participation	0.410	0.955
Core sports	2.967*	0.954
Extracurricular activity	0.667	0.599**
Math score in 75th percentile	0.595	0.729
Big school	1.100	0.743
Multiethnic school	1.247	1.086
<i>n</i>	400	431
<i>df</i>	7	7
$\chi^2$	8.929	21.163
<i>p</i>	0.258	0.004
<i>r</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.039	0.068

\* $p < .10$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

hold homophobic beliefs. However, participation in sports activities for males, a category that includes core sports, was apparently unrelated to homophobia, as indicated by the lack of significance in the regression model. Interestingly, participation in core sports was the only variable that had a trend toward significance for young males.

There is another story for young females. Table 3 also displays these results. It appears as if ethnicity only buffers females from homophobia; white females were 43.6 percent less likely than females of other ethnicities to hold homophobic beliefs, yet recall that ethnicity was not significantly associated with males' likelihood of being homophobic. Likewise, nonathletic extracurricular activities only appear to have a beneficial impact for females; participation in nonathletic extracurricular activities decreased the likelihood that females would endorse any of the homophobic items by nearly half. None of the other independent variables were significantly related to homophobic beliefs for females.

## DISCUSSION

As expected, participation in core sports was associated with homophobia among high school students; individuals who participated in football, baseball, basketball, and/or soccer sometime during the school year were nearly three times more likely to have homophobic beliefs than individuals who did not participate in these extracurricular activities. However, this effect was only observed for male participants, suggesting that the manner in which masculinity is constructed has a substantial impact on their attitudes toward gays and lesbians. As indicated previously, sports

offer young men the opportunity to develop a masculine identity (Messner 1990, 1992), an identity that often subjugates others who do not conform to the prototype of masculinity. Apparently, this is most true of individuals who participate in core sports, as suggested by the results produced in our current investigation.

Our results also indicate that participation in extracurricular activities does not have a deleterious association with individuals' attitudes toward gays and lesbians *per se*; it appears to be a function of the type of extracurricular activities in which one chooses to participate. There is a clear distinction between participation in core sports and the other types of extracurricular activities, namely nonathletic extracurricular activities. This seemingly contradictory relationship between homophobia and participation in the extracurriculum is not surprising given that previous research has shown that different extracurricular activities convey distinct messages about risky behavior (Eccles and Barber 1999). Likewise, the prosocial impact of participation in nonathletic extracurricular activities is consistent with previous research showing that individuals who engage in academically oriented extracurricular activities are 56 percent more likely to be upset after hearing a putdown directed toward a gay or lesbian than individuals who do not participate in these activities (Wagner and Osborne 2005). These individuals are not socialized with the same dogmatic messages about hegemonic masculinity present in some athletic activities (see Messner 1990, 1992 for a discussion on the impact participation in sports has on the construction of a masculine identity). A single assessment concerning the extracurriculum's influence on homophobia would therefore be ill advised, as it is clear that core sports and nonathletic extracurricular activities offer their participants distinct messages about the acceptability of homophobia.

There was also strong empirical support for our hypothesized relationship between gender and homophobia; males in the current study were more likely than females to have homophobic beliefs. This finding adds to the growing literature on the sex differences in homophobia (e.g., Bierly 1985; Heaven and Oxman 1999; Herek 2000; Kite 1984; Sakalli 2002) by showing that these negative attitudes toward the gay and lesbian community are present even before males and females enter high school. Homophobia is learned at an early age, suggesting that researchers should begin to focus on investigating negative attitudes toward the gay and lesbian community earlier than students' transition from junior high to high school.

### IMPLICATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Given the alarmingly strong relationship between participation in core sports and homophobia, it is clear that steps must be made to reduce biases within this institution. We offer a few potentially fruitful solutions. Coaches of core sports should work toward creating norms among athletes that are accepting of individuals who are gay or lesbian. Such a process could be achieved by implementing a zero-tolerance policy for athletes who make remarks that disparage members of the gay and lesbian community; athletes who engage in such activities could be subject to an automatic suspension from their team.

Alternatively, athletes who are gay or lesbian could make their presence more visible within core sports. Although we do not doubt that such a suggestion must be approached delicately, previous research has shown that contact with stigmatized individuals leads to decreases in levels of intolerance toward the target group (Anderssen 2002; Herek and Capitanio 1996). Until athletes who participate in core sports are made aware of the fact that some of their fellow teammates are gay or lesbian, the positive effects of contact will not be realized. Future research would be well advised to investigate the effectiveness of such programs, while also ensuring that the safety of athletes who are gay or lesbian is protected at all times.

In addition to the importance of studying ways to decrease homophobia in athletes who participate in core sports, an immediate question arises from the current investigation: What is it about participation in core sports that leads to increased levels of homophobia? One possibility could be found when examining the religious undertones associated with these activities. Storch et al. (2001) found that elite athletes at the collegiate level reported higher levels of religious commitment both on the organizational and intrinsic level when compared with their nonathletic counterparts. This is particularly telling given that previous research has documented a link between religiosity and homophobia; the more religious individuals are (particularly individuals who belong to a conservative religious organization), the more likely they are to hold negative attitudes toward members of the gay and lesbian community (Fisher et al. 1994; Plugge-Foust and Strickland 2000). Future research should focus on the relationship between religiosity and participation in core sports, as such an endeavor is likely to reveal interesting insights into the mechanisms responsible for the increased levels of homophobia among male athletes who participate in core sports.

Researchers should also explore the connection between participation in core sports and homophobia in the population of students' attending private schools. Research suggests that young individuals attending private schools are more intolerant toward gays and lesbians than students attending public schools (Bernoché-Baker 1987). It is very likely that the association between participation in core sports for students attending private schools is even higher than observed in the current study. Nevertheless, this is an empirical question that remains unanswered and should be addressed by future researchers.

Finally, researchers should begin assessing the direction of causation for the observed relationship between homophobia and participation in core sports. It is possible that individuals become homophobic as a result of their participation in core sports. Alternatively, it is equally possible that individuals who participate in core sports do so because they are homophobic. The same conundrum exists for the relationship between participation in nonathletic extracurricular activities and lower levels of homophobia; it may be that those who participate in nonathletic extracurricular activities become less homophobic as a result of the lower levels of homophobia within these structures. Alternatively, those who are less homophobic may choose to participate in nonathletic extracurricular activities because the lower degree of homophobia in these structures is appealing to these individuals.

Future research must be done to find the direction of causation for these observed relationships.

### LIMITATIONS

Before concluding, we should briefly note some limitations associated with the current study. One of the first things to consider when interpreting the results from the current study is that our sample is based on the responses of students from one particular city in the country (namely, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania). Although we believe that the diversity of Philadelphia provides a particularly robust test of our hypotheses, it is likely that regional differences will influence the strength of the relationship between participation in core sports and homophobia. Additionally, because of the lower likelihood that females will participate in core sports, it is possible that our findings concerning the gender differences in the relationship between participation in core sports and homophobia are an artifact of our small sample. Indeed, previous research has shown that homophobia is present among female student athletes who participate in basketball (Shakib 2003; Shakib and Dunbar 2002), one of the sports we have defined as a core sport. Future research can address this problem by oversampling for female athletes.

### CONCLUSION

As indicated in the previously mentioned paragraphs, considerable work lies ahead. By focusing attention on the aforementioned endeavors, researchers will be able to further elucidate the social structures responsible for fostering homophobia in high school athletes. It is hoped that the current investigation will aid in these explorations, ultimately leading to important policy revisions that address the problem of homophobia within the extracurriculum. Indeed, the alarmingly strong relationship between participation in core sports and homophobia produced in the current study suggests that something must be done to combat homophobia within the institution of sport. It is only when such institutions are located and targeted for interventions that we can hope to see homophobia disappear from our nation's schools.

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