

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## 'Have You Got Game?' Hegemonic Masculinity and Neo-Homophobia in U.S. Newspaper Sports Columns

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*In February 2007, U.S. media outlets covered the coming out of retired NBA player John Amaechi, one of only 6 professional male athletes from the four major U.S. team sports to have announced that he is gay. This study analyzes newspaper columns by prominent U.S. sportswriters about Amaechi's announcement. Textual analysis found that although the columns could be read as progressive, they were not; they condemned individuals who expressed overtly homophobic views while reinforcing the status quo in a variety of ways. The neo-homophobic discourse can be compared with that of new racism, a strategy that maintain racial hegemony in the U.S. As such, these columns effectively rendered Amaechi's announcement as having little value in addressing homophobia in the sports/media complex.*

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For 8 years in professional basketball, center John Amaechi scored points and grabbed rebounds in one of the most physically demanding positions in the sport. Born in England, he moved to the United States by himself as a teenager in pursuit of a National Basketball Association (NBA) career. Twice named First Team Academic All-American in college, Amaechi played for three NBA teams. Known mostly as the only British player in the league's history and the first player to score a basket in the new millennium, Amaechi retired following the 2002–2003 season and moved back to England.

In February 2007, Amaechi returned to U.S. sports pages when he publicly announced he was gay. By doing so, he immediately stepped out of the inconspicuousness of retirement and into the international spotlight. Amaechi's book, *Man in the Middle*, released by ESPN Books with his announcement, detailed

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his life as a gay man coming to grips with how his sexuality meshed with the culture in professional basketball. In an excerpt of the book in *ESPN the Magazine*, Amaechi described how he rationalized the prejudice he observed:

Homosexuality is an obsession among ballplayers, trailing only wealth and women. . . . Over time, I realized that their antigay prejudice was more a convention of a particular brand of masculinity. Homophobia is a ballplayer posture, akin to donning a “game face,” wearing flashy jewelry or driving the perfect black Escalade. (Amaechi, 2007, p. 72)

Former professional athletes such as Billy Bean, who also came out after he retired, cheered Amaechi’s announcement. However, active NBA players had mixed reactions. Some players and coaches such as Grant Hill, Amaechi’s former teammate with the Orlando Magic, and Doc Rivers, Amaechi’s coach in Orlando, praised him for speaking out (Povtak, 2007a, D1). Other players were not so accepting. Former player Tim Hardaway, as a guest on *Miami Herald* columnist Dan LeBatard’s radio program, said he hated gay people and that he “let it be known.” Faced with the prospect of a gay teammate:

I would, you know, really distance myself from him because, uh, I don’t think that’s right. And you know I don’t think he should be in the locker room while we’re in the locker room. I wouldn’t even be a part of that. (Habib, 2007, p. 1A)

Other players also indicated a reluctance to welcome openly gay players. League commissioner David Stern, however, issued a statement that implied a player’s sexuality was ultimately not an issue. ESPN quoted Stern as saying, “We have a very diverse league. The question at the NBA is always, ‘Have you got game?’ That’s it, end of inquiry” (Sheridan, 2007).

Stern’s statement, however, could not explain why no other player in the history of the league had ever come out before Amaechi. His status as a first made the story especially newsworthy and invited journalists to speculate about the significance of his announcement. As gays and lesbians have become increasingly visible in the United States, as a handful of gays and lesbians in professional sports (including WNBA player Sheryl Swoopes) have publicly self-identified in recent years, and as high-profile athletes and coaches have been part of stories involving allegations of homophobia or sex-related scandals, the issue of sexuality and sports has gained increasing attention (Butterworth, 2006; Hardin & Whiteside, 2009; Saad, 2007; Wertheim, 2005). Amaechi’s announcement required journalists, including high-profile U.S. newspaper columnists, to situate sexuality and homophobia in professional men’s sports culture.

This research explores how U.S. sports columnists contextualized Amaechi’s public disclosure of his sexuality. Sports coverage incorporates layers of social and cultural assumptions embedded in stories as “common sense,” playing out in narratives and arguments that naturalize a broader cultural hegemony (Kane & Lenskyj, 1998; Wachs & Dworkin, 1997). However, at the same time it must also be recognized that hegemony is consistently contested; thus, “media critics should

study the attempts made in reporting, broadcasting, and advertising to maintain [it]" (Trujillo, 1991, p. 303). We explore assumptions embedded in commentary about Amaechi and how the ideology of hegemonic masculinity could absorb challenges to the gender order in sports.

### **Masculinity, homophobia, and the sports/media complex**

The concept of "hegemonic masculinity," developed in the 1970s and the subject of vast research, refers to a dominant masculinity that has been idealized in U.S. culture (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is distinguished by its emphasis on overt displays of force and power, on patriarchy, and on occupational achievement; for instance, Nylund, 2007; Trujillo, 1991. Kimmel (1994) has referred to the intersection of hegemonic masculinity and the public sphere as "marketplace masculinity" (p. 183), valorized in arenas such as sports and the military.

As Whitehead and Barrett (2001) point out, hegemonic masculinity attains boundaries through the articulation of out-groups. Two groups positioned as anathema have been women and gay men (Whitehead & Barrett, 2001). Key is the demarcation and denigration of qualities, traits, and behaviors considered "feminine"—weak, passive, and subordinate (Burstyn, 1999; Messner & Sabo, 1994; Whitehead & Barrett, 2001). As Foucault and others have pointed out, sexuality has been tied to gender identities and performance. Homosexuality, a label applied beginning in the 19th century to activity that has been part of human sexuality for millennia, has come to represent in men the abandonment of authentic masculinity (Butterworth, 2006). As Connell (2001) writes, "Gayness, in patriarchal ideology, is a repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity" (p. 40).

Compulsory heterosexuality, then, is key to the construction of an idealized masculine identity, and homophobia has become central in that construction (Kimmel, 1994; Messner & Sabo, 1994; Plummer, 2006; Whitehead & Barrett, 2001). As Astell (2003) and Plummer (2006) point out, the language of masculinity includes terms such as "queer," "gay," and "faggot," used by boys as they assimilate into masculine culture.

Masculinity, however, is not monolithic; gender relations between groups of men reflect a hierarchy of intragender relations and masculinities (Connell, 2001). Alternatives to hegemonic masculinity grew "directly out of homosexual men's experience with violence and prejudice from straight men" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 831). Thus, effeminate heterosexual men and gay men can claim a subordinate masculinity (Dworkin & Wachs, 1998). Subordinated masculinities are constructed in ways that allow them to realize dividends; even though hegemonic masculinity marginalizes many men, it is also central to their overall superior socioeconomic position over women (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 2001; Connell, 2001). As such, many choose not to challenge the status quo. "[M]en . . . are simultaneously active in shaping institutional perspectives through their complacency or protest" (Foucault as quoted in Anderson, 2002, p. 352).

This is not to say that hegemonic masculinity has not been contested. Challenges are commonplace, but so are adjustments to changing social conditions (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). As Butterworth (2006) notes, hegemonic masculinity is resilient enough to “absorb counterdiscourses and mask its own rituals of renewal” (p. 152). One way it has survived intact in recent decades is through renewal of the crisis hypothesis. The crisis-of-masculinity thesis posits that legitimate, traditional displays of manhood have become stigmatized, denying men the opportunity to fulfill their “natural” yearning to exhibit behaviors deemed masculine, such as aggressiveness, competitiveness, and detachment (Whitehead & Barrett, 2001). Thus, institutions seen as defending the traditional roles of men are valorized as preserving what is “natural.” Although the masculinity-in-crisis hypothesis has been woven into popular cultural narratives, scholars argue that the more accurate way to incorporate the notion of crisis is to understand that masculinity *is* crisis; that is, its constant need to be positioned as superior to and distinct from all that can be understood as feminine *requires* constant crisis mode—“shoring up,” as it were (Edwards, 2006).

### **Sports and hegemonic masculinity**

The most powerful institution for “shoring up” hegemonic masculinity in the United States has been the sports/media complex (Jhally, 1989; Plummer, 2006; Trujillo, 1991). Messner (1992) argues that the institution of competitive sports in the United States was built on the masculinity-in-crisis thesis. Competitive team sports especially soon came to symbolize a masculine structure of power over women (Dworkin & Wachs, 1998). Aggressive team sports such as football and basketball have functioned as an “endlessly renewed symbol of masculinity” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 833), and men who participate in sports that most exemplify the qualities of hegemonic masculinity are constructed as embodiments of the ideal (Dworkin & Wachs, 1998). At the same time, sports have symbolized other valorized qualities in U.S. culture such as strong character, the promotion of justice, and the protection of social order; they also (ironically) are seen to embody “democratic promise”—equality and opportunity based on merit, not identity politics (Butterworth, 2006; Trujillo, 1991).

Because the sports/media complex is a central, if not *the* central, maintenance site for hegemonic masculinity, it is also a stronghold for cultural and institutional homophobia (Anderson, 2005). Plummer (2006) argues that a deep, “almost palpable” ambivalence about homophobia in sports persists even though attitudes in U.S. culture have progressed.

Homophobia in men’s and women’s team sports, although serving the same purpose, manifests differently (Kane & Lenskyj, 1998; Sabo & Jansen, 1998). Kane and Lenskyj (1998) refer to the “ubiquitous but invisible lesbian” (p. 193) in women’s sports; because sports are positioned as masculine pursuits, female athletes are often assumed masculine and, thus, lesbian. Female athletes are then challenged to show their aversion to masculinity in public ways, such as through makeup or feminine dress, when they are not competing. Sabo and Jansen (1998) point out

that male athletes, however, are assumed heterosexual, as to be otherwise would be a transgression. Thus, “gay men represent a unique threat to the maintenance of male hegemony in sport when compared to that of lesbian women” (p. 214). Homosexuality is positioned as anathema to the masculinity embodied in sports. The use of homophobic slurs by coaches and players to discipline athletic performance in men’s sports are commonplace, reflecting the acceptance of normative sexuality in definitions of what constitutes excellent performance (Butterworth, 2006; Messner & Sabo, 1994).

The relationship between sexuality and athleticism has always been one fraught with assumptions because of associations between homosexuality and femininity, which has been situated as weak and passive (Messner & Sabo, 1994). Plummer (2006) writes that, because many expect this reciprocal relationship, there is often a “novelty and intense interest in someone who is gay and also has exceptional sporting ability” (p. 127). Plummer’s interviews with gay men found that many felt alienated from team sports, not because of their athletic abilities but because of the culture in these sports.

Very few professional male athletes have publicly disclosed that they are gay. Butterworth (2006) lists Olympic diver Greg Louganis, figure skater Rudy Galindo, football players Dave Kopay, Jerry Smith, and Esera Tuaolo, and baseball players Glenn Burke and Billy Bean as having come out. None of these team-sport athletes listed came out while they were still playing. Team-sport athletes who come out while still competing are rare; Justin Fashanu, Britain’s first black soccer player, was the first and only professional soccer player to come out while playing (Gay Footballers, 2008). King (2004) argues that although Fashanu was marginalized because he was black in an overwhelmingly white culture, his primary transgression was his honesty about his sexuality: “Fashanu’s situation makes explicit that to be accepted, to be normalized . . . it was actually more important to be heterosexual than to be white” (p. 29). Fashanu eventually committed suicide after he was accused of sexually abusing a young, white man (King, 2004).

In recent years, there has been speculation about some professional players (perhaps most notably, baseball player Mike Piazza); yet, as Butterworth (2006) notes, the only place where active team athletes have come out has been in fiction, such as in the Broadway play “Take Me Out.” To do so in reality would be, as one sports agent put it on an episode of ESPN’s “Outside the Lines” during the late 1990s, worse for endorsements than being a convicted felon (Anderson, 2005).

However, scholar Anderson (2005) has argued that a gay team-sport athlete might be accepted now that homosexuality has become more visible in U.S. culture. A 2007 Gallup poll found public tolerance for gay rights at the highest levels recorded in the 3 decades Gallup had measured such attitudes (Saad, 2007). About 60% of Americans surveyed said they believed homosexuality should be accepted in the United States. Over the years, some sports figures have claimed that fans might be surprised to learn how many gay athletes are playing; an anonymous survey of first-year National Football League (NFL) players in 1998 found that more than 40% believed they

had at least one gay teammate (Anderson). However, a 2005 survey published in *Sports Illustrated* indicated that many sports fans (62%) believe that most Americans are not ready to accept an openly gay professional athlete, although four of five of the individuals surveyed said they were personally willing to accept an out athlete (Wertheim, 2005).

### **Media coverage of sexuality and sports**

As implied by Jhally's (1989) definition of the sports/media complex, the institutions of sports and media work hand-in-glove to reinforce hegemonic values. Research has found that hegemonic masculinity, including its elements of heterosexism and homophobia, is subtly entrenched in coverage (Dworkin & Wachs, 1998; Hardin & Whiteside, 2009; Nylund, 2007; Trujillo, 1991). Dworkin and Wachs (1998) have argued that media function as a surveillance and policing mechanism in relationship to social hierarchies:

The media can be said to carry out ideological repair work which protects sports heroes in a gender regime which privileges heterosexual manhood and pathologizes gay male and female (hetero)sexuality. (p. 2)

Trujillo (1991) argues that media representations do such ideological repair work in several ways: by linking the features of hegemonic masculinity (such as aggression) to positive cultural values and ignoring or condemning features of alternate ideologies; depicting hegemonic masculinity as desirable and alternatives as deviant; and elevating or criticizing players based on their embodiment of the masculine ideal. Sportswriters are a key part of the communicative chain that legitimizes these values (MacKinnon, 2003). Burstyn (1999) points out that sports journalists are complicit in preserving hegemonic masculinity while failing to acknowledge their own role in doing so.

Several studies in the past decade have analyzed ways sportswriters have reinforced heterosexism and homophobia. Trujillo's (1991) analysis of professional baseball player Nolan Ryan showed how newspaper coverage valorizes athletes who play within the boundaries of hegemonic masculinity through emphasis on heterosexual relationships, fatherhood, and work ethic. Dworkin and Wachs (1998) examined the media coverage of Greg Louganis and Magic Johnson, both of whom were diagnosed with HIV during their athletic careers. Their comparative analysis found that journalists presented the openly gay Louganis as deviant while preserving the heroic status of Magic Johnson, a married and self-declared heterosexual.

Nylund's (2007) analysis of sports talk radio also found reinforcement of homophobia in the discourse of radio host Jim Rome. On one hand, Rome has publicly condemned individuals who have expressed homophobic sentiments, has talked about the difficulties gay athletes face, and has stated that the sexuality of athletes should be a nonissue; in this way, Nylund argues, his stance is "groundbreaking and historic" (p. 86) in relationship to sports talk radio in general. On the other hand, however, Nylund points to Rome's use of feminine terms to taunt players and his location of homophobia in a few intolerant individuals rather than in the institution

of sports as reinforcing homophobia. In being treated as a groundless, irrational fear expressed by intolerant people, homophobia's role in constricting gender norms remains invisible. Nylund also argues that embedded in Rome's urging that gay players' "come out" is the unquestioning acceptance of heterosexuality as the natural standard. (Rome does not argue that straight players, for instance, should also publicly claim their sexual identities.)

Nylund's (2007) work is related to Kane and Lenskyj's (1998) important essay on gender, homophobia, and sports, which also argues that the emphasis on individual roots for social problems, embedded in liberal-humanist discourse, denies the structural roots of homophobia. Other recent scholarship that draws on the work of Kane and Lenskyj is Hardin and Whiteside's (2009) examination of newspaper coverage of women's college basketball coach Rene Portland, accused of discriminating against lesbian athletes. Hardin and Whiteside found that journalists framed homophobia in individual terms. Such coverage may appear to challenge homophobia because it emphasizes "gay rights," but these rights are framed in ways that blame gay individuals for not coming out. Hardin and Whiteside criticized sports coverage for its assumption of the "democratic promise" mythology in sports in regard to sexuality (Butterworth, 2006).

The valorization of sports for providing an "equal playing field" has been effectively used to dismiss the need for serious discussion of the ways institutional sports reinforce sexism, racism, and homophobia. For example, the concept of new racism, discussed by Bonilla-Silva (2003), Ferber (2007), and Leonard and King (in press), provides a powerful example of the way liberal humanism is used to deny cultural/institutional discrimination. Scholars have implicated the sports/media complex for reinforcing a color-blind ideology that denies the existence of racism, naturalizes differences in the social standing among racial groups, and blames racial minorities for their social standing (Ferber, 2007; Leonard & King, in press).

Leonard and King (in press) use the framework of color-blind ideology to examine racist media themes in coverage of athletes (the most famous being Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Olympics) who protest social injustice. They argue that media coverage of sports reflects four general color-blind themes: (a) an emphasis on individualism, rhetoric, and choice; (b) an assertion that racial phenomena are natural; (c) the use of culture to explain difference; and (d) the minimization and dismissal of race as a significant identifier. An example of new racism is the way Jackie Robinson's pioneering move into baseball is generally marked as the end of racism in sports, a narrative that denies the prejudice he and other athletes of color continued to face (Rhoden, 2006). Butterworth (2006) argues that the inclusion of the first openly gay player in team sports will likely be framed the same way—as a symbol of a sports culture that "does not discriminate" (p. 153).

Amaechi is dark-skinned and, as such, was subject to powerful stereotypic, racist media constructions in contrast to white-skinned athletes, who are often constructed as hard working and more intelligent than black athletes (Brookes, 2002; Daddario & Wigley, 2007; Murrell & Curtis, 1994). Such media constructions have been

extensively studied (Byrd & Utsler, 2007; Grainger, Newman, & Andrews, 2006; Houck, 2006). Basketball and football, two men's U.S. team sports dominated by black athletes, are also associated in mainstream media accounts with aggression and criminality in ways that reinforce mythology about white superiority (Ferber, 2007; Leonard & King, in press).

However, Amaechi's blackness as a "pure" category is confounded and perhaps even negated, according to Jones (2001), by his British nationality. Jones' concept of anglophilia among Americans seems applicable to Amaechi, where perceptions of nationality may trump those of race for British athletes. Whiteness, although loaded with privilege, is seen as "bland, formless, or cultureless" (Jones, 2001, p. 178; Oates & Durham, 2004). Furthermore, Amaechi's status as nonnative to the United States likely also factored into diminished racialized depictions of him as a player, as the U.S. press has historically had a myopic, nationalist focus on American athletes (Billings & Eastman, 2002; Denham, 2004).

### This research

We came to the Amaechi story inquiring about how opinion leaders in the sports/media complex—in this case, columnists at large-circulation dailies—would situate sexuality, masculinity, and homophobia. Although research suggests that homophobia is ubiquitous in the sports/media complex, we wondered if the improved social climate in the United States might prompt columnists to use Amaechi's announcement to challenge homophobia. We also wondered how Amaechi would be situated by columnists who have made their careers writing inside hegemonically defined boundaries in relationship to masculinity, sexuality, and sports; how would they recenter dominant masculinity in relationship to a subordinate, gay masculinity?

We used textual analysis, an approach used to uncover meanings within a text, to analyze columns (Fairclough, 2003; Meyers, 1996; Paek & Shah, 2003; Potter, 1996). We used this method instead of quantitative content analysis. As Gill (2006) points out, content analysis does not distinguish between levels of meaning embedded in the use of words and phrases. For example, a content analysis might have helped us determine the number of times the word "gay" appeared, or how often columnists used a narrowly defined notion of hypermasculinity, but is of limited value in our understanding of *how* terms are used to create meaning. As Paek and Shah (2003) note, textual analysis can help researchers "articulate the denotative meanings and make explicit the latent meanings" of texts (p. 231).

Following Potter's (1996) description of textual analysis, we took an iterative approach. We wrote self-memos throughout the research process, which helped acknowledge our own biases (Maxwell, 2005). Furthermore, we sought to neither present our analysis as the most accurate "retelling" of the texts nor to assume that our particular interpretation presented the best way to read them. Instead, we viewed "criticism as an argumentative activity in which the goal is to persuade the audience

that [our] knowledge of a text will be enriched if they choose to see a text as [we do]” (Dow, 1996, p. 4).

### **Our method**

We searched the LexisNexis database of newspaper articles for the key term “Amaechi,” published between February and March of 2007. Amaechi made his announcement and released his book in early February 2007. The LexisNexis database, which indexes articles from about 50 major U.S. newspapers (including top-circulation papers such as *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *The Boston Globe*, *Houston Chronicle*, and *Miami Herald*), is the most prominent, frequently used newspaper database in the United States (D. Cheney, personal communication, January 18, 2006). After discarding articles that did not fit our criteria (e.g., were not actually columns or only mentioned Amaechi without comment), we used 31 columns for in-depth analysis. These columns, published in major papers, have a cumulative reach of more than a million sports section readers across the United States. Our interest in studying these columns, however, was not rooted in an assumption of their individual or collective impact; instead, we sought to understand the way in which these journalists, all of whom are opinion leaders in the U.S. sports/media complex, situated the Amaechi story. Thus, we can better understand the way mainstream ideologies about sports, gender, and sexuality are being contested or maintained (Trujillo, 1991).

### *Analysis*

Each researcher involved in this study read the columns. We performed our first reading without a detailed coding to observe general, macrolevel themes. We then performed a detailed coding of each column during a second reading to better articulate and refine the initial themes as well as to pinpoint anomalies to those themes.

As a guide for our formation of themes, we used the textual devices identified in Meyers’ (1996) feminist discourse analysis of newspaper coverage of women. Meyers outlined textual devices that allowed the meaning conveyed in stories to appear “commonsensical—to reveal society’s predominant assumptions, values, myths, and stereotypes” (p. 13). Meyers argues that it is in the microlevel of news discourse that underlying meanings and ideologies can be ascertained through the use of such devices as *concealment* of ideas and facts that do not support dominant assumptions; *positive self-presentation*, which positions writers as authoritative; *negative other-presentation*, which marginalizes individuals who represent challenges to dominant ideology; and *blaming the victim*.

As Meyers (1996), Dow (1996), Gill (2006), and others have suggested, we read closely “between the lines” and paid special attention to assumptions regarding the hypermasculine and heterosexual cultural norms of professional sports. After individual coding, we collaborated on themes. We discarded themes that did not resonate with all group members, and further refined common themes to incorporate the understanding of all researchers.

## Findings

A majority of the articles that discussed Amaechi's coming out appeared to support his decision to do so. None of the columns expressed overt homophobia. Nearly all the writers rhetorically distanced themselves from the explicitly homophobic hate speech publicly expressed by some NBA players. For instance, almost two-thirds of the columns either implied or plainly stated that fans and players should tolerate and accept gay athletes.

A closer reading explored columnists' use of discursive devices described by Meyers in their presentation of Amaechi's coming out: *concealment*, *positive self-presentation*, *blaming the victim*, and *negative other-presentation*. Although explicit arguments used by the columnists condemned homophobia in men's professional sports, the consistent employment of these devices ultimately marginalized Amaechi and trivialized his announcement.

### Positive self-presentation and concealment

The columnists we read could have been interpreted as authoritative and socially progressive because of the contrast made in their columns with players who made derogatory statements about Amaechi or homosexuality. Most writers mocked the public reaction of Tim Hardaway and Shavlik Randolph, for instance, as lacking perspective and general knowledge. Columnists most commonly distanced themselves from homophobia by infantilizing and demonizing Hardaway, the former NBA star who publicly spewed "I hate gays" after Amaechi's announcement. More than one-third of the articles quoted Hardaway and responded by labeling him everything from a "bigot" to a "homophobe" to a "village idiot." One columnist responded to Hardaway's quote with, "I hate Tim Hardaway," which he later amended to, "I hate the idea of Tim Hardaway" (Maese, 2007, p. 1F). Another opened by stating, "This may come as news to Tim Hardaway, but just because a man is gay doesn't mean he wants to jump you" (Albom, 2007, p. A9). A half-dozen columnists featured, and then criticized, Shavlik Randolph's comment, "As long as you don't bring your gayness on me, I'm fine." In an evaluation of this statement, one writer equated Randolph with a blabbing middle-schooler (Rosenberg, 2007, p. 1D).

Most columns did not completely discount the existence of institutional homophobia in sports, but the majority did little more than scold individual athletes for their ignorance and intolerance. For instance, one columnist (Wilbon, 2007) reacted to NBA-star LeBron James's homophobic comments by stating:

And while [James's] public reaction wasn't as dumb, stupid and homophobic as that of Randolph and Hunter, it's not particularly enlightened. Not to be too cynical, but I don't want to pay too much attention to reactions from a 22-year-old ballplayer with incredibly limited exposure, whose life has been little more than a series of tip-offs from biddy ball to AAU to high school to the pros. LeBron's reaction simply reflects the self-absorption of the day when it comes to

young athletic gods whose transition from boyhood to manhood is in too many cases put off until retirement from the pros. (p. E1)

The columnists seemed to throw up their hands at the daunting prospect of changing these athletes' attitudes, thereby reinforcing homophobia as an inherent part of men's sports. After quoting the homophobic remarks of another NBA player, one writer exclaimed, "Oh, never mind" (Slezak, 2007, p. 105). In contrast, columnists implied that they, in fact, considered sexual orientation a nonissue. They often asked, in some form, "So what if a player is gay?" Columnists criticized the players with statements such as, "To reduce a gay teammate to his sexual urges is to dehumanize him" (Albom, 2007, p. A9); "We shouldn't give a flying flip about the sexual orientation of John Amaechi or anyone else" (Kelley, 2007, p. C1); and "[I]t shouldn't be anyone's business, and no one should care" (Breton, 2007, p. C1). Player Steve Hunter, who publicly stated that he could deal with a gay player as long as "he came to play basketball like a man and conducted himself as a good person," was ridiculed for his inability to ignore a teammate's homosexuality (Wilbon, 2007, p. E1).

### *Concealment*

In discussing Amaechi's announcement, columnists generally did not go beyond condemning individual players for homophobic remarks; thus, their columns concealed the role of institutional homophobia in the sports/media complex.

This is not to say that writers did not acknowledge the culture in male team sports. Some columnists made references to the men's locker room, and the shower in particular, as euphemisms for their heteronormative culture. The language, however, reinforced heterosexism as natural: "Asking male athletes to shed this mentality is like asking them to stop sweating" (Powell, 2007, p. A73). The same columnist suggested that if men's sports were more open to alternative "lifestyles,"

. . . the male sports world of football, basketball and perhaps baseball would stop spinning. Those are the sports that embrace the whole macho image and strict code. . . Those are the sports that, in various ways, would make life uncomfortable for any athlete perceived as a threat, not so much on the field, but in the shower. . . From very early, boys are taught that sports is all about masculinity and being a man and having the right to snap towels in the locker room. The mood and the mentality and code is created from the start. (p. A73)

The assumption that hegemonic masculinity and heterosexism are a natural, immutable part of men's sports was not, however, argued by all columnists. Perhaps the most notable departure was that by Zirin (2007), a sports critic who writes for the socially progressive magazine, *The Nation*, and his own Web site ([www.edgeofsports.com](http://www.edgeofsports.com)); his sports columns are usually printed not in the sports section but on the general op-ed pages of newspapers. In a column that appeared on an op-ed page of the *Los Angeles Times*, Zirin wrote that the problem with focusing on the "locker room code" is that "homophobia extends far beyond where pro athletes

primp and disrobe.” He added that the culture of the NBA made Amaechi’s delayed decision to disclose his homosexuality “all too understandable” (p. M6).

Other columnists, however, did call for gay players to come out, going so far as to imply that those who did not lacked ample courage. Thus, the burden of homophobia was shifted (*blaming the victim*). For instance, one columnist argued that gay players in the closet were at least partially responsible for homophobia in professional sports, and another implied that the same players were insecure and responsible for the ability of observers to only speculate about the degree of homophobia in the league (Shaw, 2007, p. D1; Steele, 2007, p. 1D). It is notable, however, that *the gay player who had come out*—Amaechi—was himself concealed. Only 6 of the 31 articles quoted Amaechi, and his voice was marginal in those columns.

### **Blaming the victim and negative other-presentation**

Another way that the *prima facie* support of Amaechi and disdain for homophobia in sports was undermined in the columns we read occurred in the way sportswriters presented Amaechi. Columns marginalized Amaechi as both a professional basketball player and as someone of significance. The columns ultimately presented Amaechi negatively and thus *blamed the victim* for homophobia in sports (we argue that Amaechi, who described the prospect of coming out while he was playing as “terrifying,” is a victim).

On a macrolevel, columnists marginalized Amaechi by their lack of attention, as evidenced by the fact that only 31 of the columnists who write for papers in the LexisNexis database chose to even write about Amaechi at all. Furthermore, at least three of those articles devoted no more than a few sentences or scant details about Amaechi’s announcement. On a microlevel, more than two-thirds of the articles marginalized Amaechi by criticizing his basketball skills, his failure as a pioneer, his retirement, and his outsider status.

Columnists most commonly marginalized Amaechi by criticizing his performance and record as a basketball player. Writers repeatedly referred to Amaechi as a “basketball footnote;” an “NBA nobody;” “at most, a functional NBA player;” a “second-string player;” a “scrub;” a “has-been;” a “major disappointment;” and a “fringe player” (Maese, 2007, 1F; Povtak, 2007b, p. C15; Powell, 2007, p. A73; Shaw, 2007, D1). In total, columnists directly denigrated his skills 39 times; they called him a “journeyman” (a derogatory term in relationship to professional athletes) five times. Adjectives ranged from “astonishingly unproductive” to “marginal” to “below-mediocre” (Bondy, 2007, p. 65; Luhm, 2007, para .13; Whitlock, 2007, p. 1). One columnist wrote, “John Amaechi didn’t fade quickly from the NBA because he is a homosexual. He struggled because he wasn’t a very complete, or a very committed, player” (Povtak, 2007b, p. C15). Others were harsher, calling Amaechi “one of the worst players in franchise history”:

[T]he young Brit redefined the cliché, “Take the money and run.” Amaechi took about \$6 million of Larry Miller’s money and didn’t run. . . didn’t shoot. . . didn’t rebound. Looking back, the price tag for his astonishingly unproductive

layover in Utah is mind-boggling. Amaechi ended up being paid \$5,660 for every minute played, \$21,879 for every point scored and \$32,258 for every rebound he ever grabbed for the Jazz. . . So you judge. Is it harsh to suggest Amaechi is one of the worst players in Jazz history? I don't think so. (Luhm, 2007, para. 13)

Columnists used their assessment of Amaechi as a player to justify their belittling of his announcement. Because he was not a very good athlete, the logic seemed to go, his coming out was not very meaningful and could not be used to gauge homophobia in men's professional sports. Most columnists implied that the sports/media complex, locker room culture, and fans would not be truly tested until they had rejected an elite player who came out. For example, Rosenberg (2007) speculated that if Greg Oden (the first pick in the 2007 NBA Draft) was gay, teams would still be too tempted by his talents not to select him because of his sexuality. Although Rosenberg praised Amaechi's coming out, he predicted that for a gay player to be accepted in the NBA, "It would take undeniable athletic talent. . . I don't know where we will find the first openly gay player, but I'm sure it won't be on the bench" (p. 1D). Powell (2007) added that it would "take a player of Magic's [Johnson] stature to break through the bias, and he'd have to go public while still playing" (p. A73).

Columnists combined Amaechi's athletic failure with a call for a more legitimate pioneer. Historical references to racism against African Americans were commonly used analogically for the oppression of homosexual men in sports. A quarter of the articles called for the equivalent of Jackie Robinson, the first Black player to integrate Major League Baseball. Columnists reinforced the emphasis on a pioneer's need for great athletic skill through statements such as, "It was difficult for people to watch Jackie Robinson. . . at first, and they got used to it" (Povtak, 2007b, p. C15), and "Jackie Robinson succeeded partly because he had the right temperament, but also because was too gifted to ignore" (Rosenberg, 2007, p. 1D).

Typically, the analogy to baseball's integration of African Americans valorized sports as an equal-rights arena and presented the first great homosexual male athlete as "the last uncrossed barrier" (LeBatard, 2007, p. D2). Amaechi, the columnists agreed, did not accomplish this goal. Only one columnist challenged the equal playing field myth by pointing out how the stress of integration ruined Robinson's health and how black coaches winning the Super Bowl is still considered news (Steele, 2007, p. 1D).

The portrayal of Amaechi as a failed pioneer partly hinged on his retirement. All but two of the columns noted that Amaechi is no longer an active NBA player. The descriptors of him as an ex-player, retired, or former player appeared over 50 times—almost 60 if the photo captions are included. Although mentioning the retirement is reasonable, the prevalence of this emphasis highlighted Amaechi's failure as a pioneer. Many columnists baldly stated that his retired status severely detracted from the impact of his announcement, despite the fact that only five professional male athletes from the four major U.S. team sports have come out of the closet after David Kopay in 1975. One columnist, arguing that announcements

by retired athletes are insufficient, seemed to imply that their sacrifice had not been great enough. “Someone will have to sacrifice his career, maybe his life, for future generations,” he wrote (Steele, 2007, p. 1D). Another wrote:

John Amaechi is not the courageous, breakthrough athlete we’ve been waiting for in America. He is neither a hero nor a coward. He is a nice gay man who was once an NBA player, now selling a book while funding a worthwhile recreation center back in Manchester, England. (Bondy, 2007, p. 65)

Some columnists chided Amaechi as cowardly for being retired and living overseas. One article stated, “Bravery in this context is reserved for the first athlete to come out today and go to practice tomorrow. It’s not coming out from across the pond—Amaechi lives in England—four years after retirement” (Shaw, 2007, p. D1). Another columnist also wrote that Amaechi’s coming out as a retired player is “like challenging the neighborhood bully while backpedaling furiously” (Powell, 2007, p. A73). By presenting Amaechi’s retirement to Britain so prominently, columnists marginalized him in both time and space. At the same time, they also villainized him for daring to pursue occupational success as a book author; more than a quarter of the articles implied or directly accused Amaechi of opportunism because his announcement came with the release of his book. One columnist, for instance, wrote: “[N]evermind that Amaechi’s announcement smacked of a public-relations ploy and coincided with a book release” (Canzano, 2007, p. D1). In truth, Amaechi’s book *was* the announcement, and it is typical to publicize books through articles and interviews, as Amaechi did.

## Discussion and conclusions

The announcement by John Amaechi, the first NBA player to come out as gay, presented the opportunity for significant challenges to masculine hegemony in the sports/media complex. We found instead that commentary did little to expand the notion of what it means to be an athlete or to be masculine at the highest levels of sports in the United States. Indeed, these columnists did quick work of the ideological repair necessary to maintain the status quo while they positioned themselves as progressive and tolerant of alternative identities in sports. They “blamed the victim” and presented Amaechi negatively in a number of ways, ultimately presenting him as incapable of competing in professional sports. These rhetorical strategies rendered Amaechi’s announcement as having little or no value in addressing homophobia in the sports/media complex.

### Use of liberal-humanist rationales

As Nylund (2007) argued in his analysis of Jim Rome’s discourse, we must acknowledge that the discourse in the columns we read may well be “a key first step to transform heterosexism in sports” (p. 89). The columns did, from a liberal-humanist standpoint, condemn individual expressions of homophobia. They also, to

a degree, raised the question about why demonstrations of heterosexuality are central in the sports/media complex.

Yet, we argue that their condemnation of individual players allowed these columns to be deceptively positioned as progressive. Their use of a liberal-humanist discourse allowed them to address homophobia on very limited terms and to avoid any substantive arguments that would address the roots of homophobia in the NBA and other men's professional team sports. These columnists were able to contrast themselves against individual "bigots" such as Tim Hardaway, but also against Amaechi himself, who, apparently, did not deserve his NBA jersey. They did not acknowledge the fact that Amaechi had, indeed, played his way into the most elite group of basketball players in the United States; instead, columnists positioned him as weak and passive. *Naturally*, then, he was not *legitimate*. These columnists answered Commissioner Stern's question, "Have you got game?" with a resounding "No." It turns out, then, that a gay athlete really *does not belong* in sports.

### **Similarities to new racism**

This discursive strategy, similar to that found by both Nylund (2007) and Hardin & Whiteside (2009), resembles the discourse of *new racism* in the sports/media complex as outlined by Leonard and King (in press). Beyond their emphasis on individualism, columnists asserted Amaechi's failure to perform athletically as a natural reason his announcement should be dismissed, and they minimized and denied that sexual identity matters in sports (e.g., "So what if a player is gay?"). This form of neo-homophobia, it seems, has successfully absorbed any positive counterdiscourses in U.S. culture in relation to homosexuality and rendered them meaningless in institutional sports (Butterworth, 2006).

New racism and neo-homophobia seem to intersect powerfully in the calls of columnists for a "gay Jackie Robinson." Again, the burden for sexual tolerance in sports is placed on an individual—on the oppressed. Gay men must be responsible for convincing the world to accept them in the same manner black athletes have had to shoulder responsibility for their acceptance (or not). Furthermore, the analogy to Jackie Robinson also conjures imagery of the "equal playing field" metaphor so central to mythology about sports in the United States. If only the right gay athlete would step forward, we could mark the end of homophobia in sports. This argument both ignores the truth about ongoing racism and, at the same time, fails to grasp the differences in the roles of race and sexuality in the sports/media complex. Although race and masculinity intersect in powerful ways that reinforce social hierarchies that privilege whiteness, sexuality remains a more powerful, entrenched arbiter of masculinity.

### **Masculinity in crisis**

Gay men in sports challenge conceptual understandings of manhood and the way by which heterosexual men are privileged over subordinate (feminized) identities. Our reading of these columns suggests that hegemonic masculinity is ultimately

a fragile construct, as Edwards (2006) suggests. As an identity that is ideally fixed but unstable because of its reliance on contrast and subordination, *crisis* is integral to its maintenance. Thus, in the sports/media complex, where hegemonic ideology is of central importance, an “all hands on deck,” crisis-driven mentality encourages universal complicity. Sports columnists, then, are a key part of the large communicative chain charged with its safekeeping, as they are conduits considered credible because of presumptions about their authority, “objectivity,” and detachment. As journalists reinforce sexual norms and conceal institutional homophobia in sports, however, authentic, revolutionary progress toward making the promise of an equal playing field a reality for all athletes will remain elusive.

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