

The Intricate Paradox of Allyship in Collegiate Sport

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to explore how allyship is experienced among student-athletes. We conducted focus groups to gauge firsthand stories of student-athletes who are members of culturally marginalized groups, as well as members from historically dominant groups. Specifically, the research focused on how student-athletes from various backgrounds attempt (or fail) to work together to jointly establish a sense of belonging on their collegiate sports teams. Using co-cultural theory and dominant group theory as theoretical frameworks, and focus groups as the method, the analysis reveals a paradox in how allyship is viewed and enacted between different groups. Such paradoxes included the themes of internal learning/external action, speaking/ listening, relationship building and power dynamics that present roadblocks towards successful allyship.

BACKGROUND

Co-Cultural Theory & Dominant Group Theory

- Co-cultural theory involves the interaction between historically marginalized and dominant groups and how they intersect and influence communication practices and interactions.
- Dominant group theory involves understanding how dominant group members communicate when interacting with others.

Ethical Allyship

- Developmental peacebuilding model (DPM) fosters cultural change at national and global levels and identifies three types of prosocial activism for such constructive cultural change.
- Intercultural similarities across the world of allyship
- Athlete Activism**
 - Athletes, and Black athletes in particular, began to take advantage of sports as a site of activism in the 1960s amid the Civil Rights Movement, the fight for women's rights, and the Vietnam War.
 - Resurfaced in recent years in American professional soccer, football, and basketball leagues (i.e., Colin Kaepernick national anthem protest, WNBA police brutality protests, etc.)

METHODS

Initial Survey

- 83 Respondents
- 4 Universities
- Ages 18-23
- Self-Identified Gender:
 - 44 Female
 - 36 Male
 - 1 Non-conforming
 - 1 Non-binary
 - 1 Did not disclose
- Self-Identified Race:
 - 54 Non-BIPOC
 - 22 BIPOC
 - 7 Identified Unsure
- Self-Identified Sexuality:
 - 65 Straight/Heterosexual
 - 6 Bisexual, 3 Lesbian
 - 2 Queer, 1 Pansexual
 - 1 Curious
 - 4 Did not disclose

Focus Groups

- 38 Participants
- 3 Universities
- Ages 18 to 22
- Self-Identified Gender:
 - 25 Female
 - 9 Male
 - 1 Non-conforming
 - 1 Non-binary
- Self-Identified Race:
 - 22 Non-BIPOC
 - 13 BIPOC
 - 1 Identified Unsure
- Logistics
 - 9 Group Sessions
 - 1 Hour Each
 - Virtual via Zoom
 - Divided into Homogenous Groups



SIGNIFICANCE

Student-athletes of marginalized identities at predominantly white institutions are constantly surrounded by dominant group members on the field, at practice, in their classes, in residence halls, and various other collegiate settings. As a result, they regularly navigate spaces where allyship may be helpful, which pinpoints to the study's significance. Although co-cultural group student-athletes may not be "seeking out" allyship as noted by certain focus group participants, allyship becomes important when bias-related incidents or microaggressions are experienced. In order to feel safe from these incidents and comfortable being their authentic selves, co-cultural group members expressed they need to feel supported by their coaches, teammates, and peers. Without this sentiment, student-athletes cannot be expected to perform at their full potential in sports events or develop a sense of belonging with their teammates.

CONCLUSION

As expressed by all of the focus group participants, allyship is a process that involves internal and external work, balancing action and inaction, and navigating and creating various relationships with power dynamics in mind. This is an intricate process since allyship is dynamic, continual, and personal rather than a rigid model with an endpoint (LeMaire et al., 2020). It requires continual adjustment, growth, and effort through communication and action to ensure more successful allyship than complacency to systemic racism. Though some student-athletes may be able to focus solely on the sport at hand, co-cultural group athletes navigate added stressors of bias incidents, racism, exclusion and so forth. As Kelly, a Black student-athlete, expressed, "When I continuously accept and take racism on a daily basis, the one space that I shouldn't have to is where I'm an athlete. It shouldn't be that I'm a Black athlete, I should just be an athlete." This study can therefore prompt coaches and athletic administrators to devote more attention to the experiences unique to BIPOC student-athletes, as well as their own allyship in creating safe and welcoming spaces for both dominant and co-cultural group athletes.

REFERENCES

LeMaire K. L., Miller M. L., Skerven K., Nagy G. A. (2020). *Allyship in the academy [Working paper series: Navigating careers in the academy: Gender, race, and class]*. Susan Bulkeley Butler Center for Leadership Excellence. <https://www.purdue.edu/butler/documents/Working%20Paper%20Series%20-%20Spring%202020%20Issue.pdf>

ANALYSIS

Several themes that emerged across the groups. The common themes involved the idea of internal/external allies, action/inaction, relationship building, and unique to the co-cultural group, skeptical allyship. An interesting aspect of relationship building is that it was much more pronounced with the dominant group members. It is still important to include here because of how often it came up in the focus groups. The analysis section below dives into each of the themes and subthemes within the theoretical frameworks of co-cultural and dominant group theories while using quotations from the participants to shed light on their voices.

Internal vs. External Allyship

(Un)Learning

- Includes unlearning homogenous white upbringings, learning more about oppression minorities face, and recognizing privilege.
- A continuous process and initial step to true allyship.
- For the dominant group members in the focus groups, it appears that it is college campuses where this moment of epiphany comes to fruition.

Listening vs. Speaking

- Knowing when to speak and when to give space for co-cultural group members to speak.
- Balancing stepping up and stepping back in order to give voice to co-cultural group members.
- Creating safe spaces with empathy, humility, and respect.

(In)Action

- Inaction Examples: Going to events, doing research, and attending an anti-racist book club all participate in the process of unlearning bias and racism
- Action Examples: Being an active intervener during bias related incidents, creating a safe and welcoming space, and going to protests.

Relationship Building

Dominant group members believe that in order to be an ally, you must have relationships with BIPOC individuals

- Can lead to discussions of racism where dominant group members become more aware of the experiences of co-cultural group members.
- Can lead to the erasure of difference when forming relationships based on similarities.

Power Dynamics

- Co-cultural members specifically often do not find comfort in talking with the team captains or coaches due to previous experiences of those individuals often being involved in bias-related incidents themselves.

LIMITATIONS

1. There was a disproportionate amount of BIPOC and white student-athlete respondents. Consequently, this uneven response rate led to the creation of three dominant group member focus groups and only two co-cultural group member focus groups. This disproportionate representation however does reflect the demographics of the predominantly white institutions these student-athletes attend. Nevertheless, researchers should aim to collect more data from BIPOC student-athletes in future studies.
2. Due to the focus group discussions being limited to an hour, some of the conversations of the participants had to be interrupted to cover all the prepared questions as well as respect the time of each focus group member. Future researchers would benefit from dedicating more time for each focus group and allowing participants to spend more time describing their experiences.