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# An exploratory study of black male college athletes' perceptions on race and athlete activism

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## Abstract

This qualitative pilot case study focuses on black male athletes at a major university in the United States of America (USA) and utilizes critical race theory (CRT) to understand their perspectives on race and athlete activism in the context of American society and sport. Our interviews with this important stakeholder group uncovered four themes related to their perceptions of race and athlete activism: 1) race is still an important issue in American society and sport; 2) knowledge about the activism of black athletes from the past is important; 3) differences in the mindset and attitude toward activism between current and past black athletes exist; and 4) black athletes have a responsibility to speak on social issues and causes today. These findings are discussed in terms of their implications for theory, research, and practice. In addition, future research directions are offered for scholars who are interested in diversity and social justice in the context of American higher education and college sport.

## Keywords

black athletes, critical race theory, qualitative inquiry, racism, social change

Since the early 1990s Dana Brooks and Ronald Althouse have focused on the issue of race, racism, and racial equity, equality, and diversity within the context of major college sport in the USA (see Brooks and Althouse, 1993, 2000, 2007). As suggested by the titles of their books, the black athlete, in particular, is a primary stakeholder group of

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higher education and college sport to whom scholars, educators, and administrators should pay particular attention. Today, black athletes represent a large portion of the participants in the high profile, revenue-producing Division I sports of (American) football (roughly 46%), men's basketball (roughly 60%), and women's basketball (roughly 47%) (Lapchick et al., 2009). Black athletes are also strongly represented in indoor and outdoor track and field, with approximately 30 percent being black females, and 28 percent being black males (DeHass, 2009). Only a few decades ago, these individuals were not allowed to participate in these sports at predominantly white institutions of higher education (PWIHE).

Today's black athlete, in comparison to his and her counterparts from the Civil Rights era, has not, for the most part, had to deal with the overt forms of racism that black people, particularly athletes, at PWIHE had to confront and endure on a daily basis (e.g. physical and verbal abuse, outright denial of access to resources and opportunities). However, research suggests that both black female and male athletes still must contend with racism (albeit more subtle, covert forms), and face unique challenges because of their race. For example, black female athletes are marginalized and silenced by the media, athletic administrators, coaches, and other athletes (Bruening, 2005; Bruening et al., 2005). Research has also critiqued the social structure in athletics as a way to demonstrate the treatment discrimination black male athletes have experienced, and to better understand why this particular group continues to lag far behind in terms of academic performance and graduation rates (Benson, 2000; Donnor, 2005; Hawkins, 2001; Singer, 2005, 2009; Smith, 2007).

Although we acknowledge the issues regarding race and racism that black female athletes within the USA face, and the racism in sport outside the American context (see Vecsey, 2003; Wade, 2004), our concern and focus here is on the black male athlete in American college sport, particularly in the above-mentioned sports where they are most highly represented. Our desire to focus on this social group is rooted in our experiences working with this group (as mentors, advisors, and instructors) and understanding that the black male athlete has played a major role in the social changes we have seen in American society and sport over past several decades.

## **Race, racism, and athlete activism**

Social and political activism (i.e. organized and collective forms of protest and conflict) among blacks in the USA emerged in response to the racism that was born from the social construction of race in American society, and that continued to be embedded in its social institutions, including sport. Deeds of activism can hardly be discussed without mentioning the role black male athletes, both amateur and professional, played throughout the Civil Rights Movement in America (Edwards, 1969). Perhaps the most recognizable symbol of black male athlete activism is San Jose State University track athletes, John Carlos's and Tommie Smith's Black Power salute on the victory stand at the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City. These black male athletes and many others all played an integral part in the movement that illuminated social injustices of the time and incited change regarding American social, cultural, and economic policy.

In the current era, several commentators have chronicled racism's pervasiveness in American society, and in light of that, some writers have been critical of today's black male athlete for his lack of engagement in race related activism (see Powell, 2008; Rhoden, 2006; Roach, 2002). In an interview with *Color Lines* magazine, Harry Edwards, author of the book, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (1969), and chief architect of the 1968 Mexico City Olympic boycott and protest, stated the following concerning today's black athlete:

Today's black athlete is very different. If you asked them about the history of the black athlete, many couldn't tell you much. They don't find that history relevant to their world. Some even get angry when you ask them about it. One up-and-coming NBA star was asked about Oscar Robertson and he said, 'Don't know, don't care, and don't take me there.' They don't care about whose shoulders they stand on. They have no idea about who set the table at which they are feasting. And the worse part about it is not that they are ignorant of this history, but they are militantly ignorant. The sad part about it is that when people forget how things came about, they are almost certainly doomed to see them go. (cited in Leonard, 1998: 3)

Since Harry Edwards's mobilization efforts toward the end of the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1960s, there have been very few instances of black male athlete activism.

So what is different about then and now? Black male athletes of the Civil Rights era were compelled to protest because of the blatant, overt discrimination they were forced to endure simply because of their skin color. This mistreatment stemmed from individuals' adherence to racist beliefs and ideologies, which hold that whites or whiteness, reign supreme over blacks or blackness (Chideya, 1999; Crenshaw et al., 1995). Therefore, the root or core catalyst of the activism (i.e. persistence of behavior influenced by adherence to racist ideologies) taken on by past black male athletes continues to be present. The primary difference between the two generations or time periods lies within the governmental action taken (e.g. Civil Rights Act of 1964) to try and deinstitutionalize racism within the legal system and other social institutions, thus making it illegal to discriminate based on one's race. However, the legal mandates are only equipped to address racist action, and are not able to address racist ideologies. Therefore, although some people might claim racism is passé because there are no legal boundaries or constrictions placed on the black community like there were during the Civil Rights era, racist ideologies and racism continues to be systemic in America society and its social institutions (Feagin, 2006).

Despite the significant decline in acts of the overt racism that existed in previous times (i.e. Civil Rights Movement), it can still be argued that there are many issues worthy of black athlete activism today. Examples in sport could include, but are not limited to, black underrepresentation in college head coaching and administration, athlete eligibility rules, professional athlete pensions/retirement plans, utilizing people of color for cheap labor in shoe making factories overseas, and student athlete compensation. Outside the realm of sport, the options are widespread. Specific examples include, but are not limited to, current military efforts (e.g. Iraq and Afghanistan), the ethnic cleansing in Darfur, poverty, and general lack of resources within urban/inner-city communities. In more contemporary times (1990s–present) there have been a few black male athletes

such as former NBA players Craig Hodges (Chicago Bulls guard during the Michael Jordan era in the early 1990s) and Etan Thomas (current NBA player) who have spoken out on issues of racial and other injustices in society. However, there have been very little, if any, black male college athletes who have spoken out on injustice and inequality in American society and its social institutions.

Although this insight provided by these scholars and journalists is certainly valuable, there is a scarcity of empirical data examining this topic. These critics have offered powerful insights, but to our knowledge, few scholars, if any, have made an assiduous effort to gauge today's black male college athletes' perceptions of race and athlete activism. In order to begin the task of addressing this void in the literature, we employed an exploratory qualitative case study design so that we might garner a more lucid comprehension of black male athlete activism in contemporary American society and college sport.

It is also worth noting this study was broadly informed by critical race theory (CRT), which positions 'race' at the focal point of analysis, with a particular interest on how race is a historical social construction creating privileges for some racial groups (i.e. whites), and disadvantage for other racial groups (i.e. people of color) in American society. More specifically, two of the five tenets as explained by Tate (1997) were of particular use:

- 1) Racism is pervasive in America, deeply ingrained in the very fabric of society and its many social institutions.
- 2) Places great value on the experiential knowledge and perspectives of racial minorities and other subordinated groups in American society.

## **Methodology**

We utilized an exploratory case study design (Berg, 2001) in our investigation. Due to the absence of any sustained efforts by researchers to explore this particular issue with black male college athletes, this approach was a great starting point or prelude to larger social scientific studies in the future. The initial stage of the research process involved negotiating access. Singer (2005) posited negotiating access to conduct research with athletes in these types of big-time college sport programs is a difficult and challenging process. Fortunately, the lead researcher had an established relationship with the senior associate athletic director for academics through previous employment as a mentor to black male athletes at this particular university.

The university where this study took place is located in the Midwestern portion of the USA, and is a member institution of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and a Bowl Championship Series (BCS) school (i.e. one of 66 athletic departments that constitute the six elite conferences, plus Notre Dame). The athletic teams, particularly in the high visibility sports (i.e. football, and men's and women's basketball), have been very successful over the past several years. Further, several of the black male athletes in some of these sports have made successful transitions to the professional level in their respective sports.

Purposeful, convenience sampling was utilized in order to select the black male athletes who participated in our study. More specifically, Patton (2002) distinguished criterion sampling as a type of purposeful sampling. This mode of sampling requires

the participants to meet certain predetermined criteria in order to be selected. The participants in the study were required to meet two criteria: 1) black male athletes who had remaining eligibility or who recently had exhausted their eligibility in college athletics within the past two years; and 2) black male athletes (current or former) who were willing to take part once they knew and understood the nature of the study. Further, our sampling strategy was one of convenience in the sense that our participants were available and easily accessible (given the first author's past experiences working with this particular population). This sampling strategy is especially useful in those situations where researchers desire to obtain preliminary information about a research question in an effective and efficient manner (Berg, 2001).

The final sample consisted of six black male athletes who were either currently on athletic scholarship or recently completed their eligibility within the past two years (see Table 1). Four of the individuals self-identified as being black American; another as bi-racial, but stated he identified as black American because of his life experiences; and the other athlete was born in the Caribbean and had recently moved to the USA to compete in athletics at this university. Three of the athletes participated in track and field, and three participated in football.

Before each interview began, the participants were given a brief overview of the topics to be discussed and informed of their voluntary participation. There were five multilevel questions asked of all participants (see Appendix). Probing questions were asked in order to extract more meaning and detail when needed (Kvale, 1996). Once all of the interviews were completed, the interviewer/lead researcher was able to transcribe each of the interviews verbatim, and share them with the co-researchers as well as the research participants. This sharing of the transcripts with the participants served as an initial stage in the

**Table 1.** The final sample

Participants	Self-identified race	Current year in school	Age	National origin	Academic major	College sport played
1	Black American	Sophomore	20	USA	Applied Arts & Sciences <sup>d</sup>	Football
2	Black American	Graduate student	24	USA	BA Sociology M.Ed. Education	Football
3	Black American <sup>a</sup>	Graduate student	23	USA	Social work <sup>d</sup>	Football
4	Black American <sup>b</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup> year senior	23	USA	Journalism <sup>d</sup>	Track and field
5	Black American	5 <sup>th</sup> year senior <sup>c</sup>	22	USA	BA Advertising	Track and field
6	Jamaican	Junior	24	Jamaica	Multidisciplinary studies <sup>d</sup>	Track and field

<sup>a</sup>Of Trinidadian descent.

<sup>b</sup>Bi-racial.

<sup>c</sup>Has since earned Bachelor's degree.

<sup>d</sup>Currently pursuing degree.

member checking process (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) because it allowed the participants to ensure their voice was captured properly.

Data were analyzed utilizing an open code method in order to inductively label the phenomenon (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). The lead researcher initially analyzed and coded the transcripts. After this initial attempt by the lead researcher, all of the researchers came together and discussed what was emerging based on their individual analyses. The researchers examined the transcripts line by line using open coding in order to generate some major themes. The themes that emerged were: racism, knowledge, mindset, and responsibility.

## Findings

As mentioned above, four central themes emerged from our analysis of these preliminary data that were generated from this exploratory case study. First, in line with the CRT framework, the theme of *race/racism* emerged from the data. That is, the participants believed that even though progress has been made in American society since the Civil Rights era and before, the issue of race and the potential problems associated with it are still salient in America today. Second, the theme of *knowledge/awareness* emerged. The participants exuded a basic knowledge of the activism their predecessors from the Civil Rights era participated in, and the impact it had on the opportunities they as black athletes are able to have today. Third, the theme, *mindset*, was an interesting finding from our study. Our participants insisted today's black athlete has a different mentality and mindset toward issues of race than his predecessors, and there is not as much of a willingness by today's athletes to engage in activism. Finally, the theme of *responsibility* suggests that, despite the mindset of today's black male athlete, this athlete should use his social status to speak out against certain injustices in society and sport. We seek to further elucidate each of these themes below by providing some of the narratives from the interviews with these six black male athletes.

### *Race/racism*

The black male athletes in this study articulated much concern as it relates to race in America today. They suggested race will always play a part in the culture we live in. For instance, one of the athletes referenced how he, as a black man in America, would have to work harder in order to attain the position in society he desires. The following explains this sentiment:

As a black male, I understand that I have to have a little bit more than someone with the same qualifications as a white male would have. Same experiences, same background, similar experience as an athlete that type of deal but because I'm a black male, my opportunities would be less and I probably would need a little bit more to be able to have same type of position or to succeed and advance as quickly.

Despite the election of the United States' first black President, Barack Obama, concerted progress towards equality and equity is still needed. As one of the participants stated:

you a black person . . . you do certain things and it amounts up to what a white person does sometimes it seem bigger because of all the things we [black people in America] went through . . . to say that race is [non-existent] is ignorant because we all know it still does . . . we still have rules in place that say you have to interview African Americans for certain positions so I mean obviously there's still something that's holding it back from being completely equal and who knows if it will ever be equal.

The latter part of this statement was in reference to the National Football League's (NFL) Rooney Rule which requires organizations to interview a minority candidate as it pertains to job openings (Wolverton, 2005). Such a rule was put into practice because of the prolonged lack of black head coaches at the time of its inception. While the Rooney Rule is an achievement in the way of removing barriers and increasing access to positions historically denied by one's race, one must ask the question of why such a rule is necessary? The necessity stems from inter-generationally transmitted notions of the normalcy and acceptability of discriminating against an individual strictly because of the color of their skin. The results have proven to be nothing less than a sign of hope for aspiring black head coaches. In recent years, the NFL had no black head coaches, but as of the last NFL Racial and Gender Report Card, there are currently six out of a possible 32 teams with black head coaches, which equates to roughly 19 percent (Lapchick et al., 2009). Compared to the NCAA Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), which ended the 2008 season with seven black head football coaches out of a possible 120 (Maisel, 2008), and after the ongoing discourse, 11 at the end of the 2009 season's end (Agyemang and DeLorme, 2010), one can see the inroads that have been made in NFL.

The other participants communicated their agreement with this phenomenon concerning race relations in the United States and how race has played an integral part. The following quotations represent these sentiments.

It's been a biggest impact [race] on everybody because that's what everybody really judge you off . . . they put you on a scale and base you off your race . . . race will always matter . . . it's just because of the stereotypes we have that we say about each other.

Just seeing something, a visual difference between people will always create some hesitance, some type of hesitance.

I feel as if though race will always be an issue in the world forever.

In fact, the Caribbean born athlete provided a much needed perspective of race relations in America. Noteworthy here is this participant's ability to share a keen insight on black/white race relations in America after only being in the country for a short length of time. The fact this young man was able to notice, process, and insightfully comment on, the normalcy of racism in America offers further support of the first tenet of CRT.

He confirmed America's dilemma with race by stating that race 'is a big issue' and further that:

Racism is still going on right now. It's a big issue in the United States right now, especially in the South . . . yeah mmhmm . . . Always an issue in America, I don't think it will never stop, it

will never stop. I don't know what it will take ya know, I mean to erase, stop. I don't think it's going to stop.

These athletes stated the permanence of issues dealing with race is allowed to persist not only due to the individuals in senior level management, but also those in the media. In commenting about how media personnel sometimes say he speaks 'well', one of athletes stated, 'we're human beings . . . you want me to speak like a monkey?' Essentially, this group of athletes expressed how race continues to play a significant role in hindering black people in America from realizing complete equality.

### *Knowledge/awareness*

As it relates to awareness of actors and actions taken by black athletes some 50 to 70 years ago, the athletes displayed a basic knowledge, and proclaimed they would have participated in the same acts if they lived during that era. For the most part, the athletes were able to articulate the significance of movements such as 'The Revolt of the Black Athlete', while also being able to name some of the aforementioned key figures of black athlete activism:

I think it was really big umm if we look back at it . . . these were opportunities for blacks to break into the mainstream . . . the first opportunity to stand out [and] get some notoriety outside the black community . . . there's countless pioneers . . . Jackie Robinson . . . Jesse Owens.

The participants were able to reify the statements made by other participants partaking in the study. All of the athletes had memories through pictures or television of the previously mentioned 1968 Summer Olympic Games. The Black Power salute, they felt, was a powerful image that stands out in the minds of many. For example, in reference to Tommie Smith and John Carlos, one of the athletes stated the following:

They got 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> and showed that you know, throughout all the drama, they gonna still represent their people. These people were determined to do it even though some people doubted them and try to hold them back. They were determined to become one of the best.

Other black male athlete activists referred to were Muhammad Ali and Bill Russell. All of these athletes played a significant role in speaking out against injustices. One participant even went as far as to mention how these individuals allowed him to have the prospects he does now as a student:

It's helped a lot of guys ya know like myself you know to go farther with their education because a lot of guys here wouldn't be able to get an education if you know they didn't play a sport . . . it's pretty important from that standpoint . . .

The athletes in our study acknowledged and showed appreciation for what their predecessors did, and now recognize the benefit current athletes encompass. They were aware and appreciative of the great sacrifices that were made so that they could have the opportunities

they have today. One athlete proclaimed the following when referring to what was done in the past: 'A lot of people, a lot of blood, sweat, and tears . . . anguish, family pain.'

In reflecting on what their predecessors have done on their behalf, the participants insisted they would have done the same if they had walked in their shoes. As one participant expressed, 'Yeah, I think I would have stood up for a certain cause because I know it will affect other people you know what I'm saying.' The athletes not only demonstrated familiarity with iconic black male athlete activists, but also the willingness to take part in activism as the following quotations demonstrate:

Yeah, I think I would have stood up for a certain cause because I know it will affect the other people.

I think yeah because I am from a family that stood up for what we believe in so yeah, I'd stand up for what I really wanted.

Definitely I would do something . . . just to send a message . . . I would do something to show that I'm stepping up and I'm happy that I'm stepping up. Nothing is wrong with that.

Such responses illustrate the reverence this group of black male athletes has for their predecessors. In saying that, however, it must be noted the notion of participation in athlete activism is speculative from this generation since they were not alive during the Civil Rights Movement. One of the participants spoke on this notion, giving a contrary answer compared to the other participants:

I would hope I would. I can sit back and say, yeah I would, but to be really honest, I don't really know. It woulda been hard back then. It was kinda dangerous to do it at those times. They had backlashing effects when they did that.

### *Mindset*

Despite saying race still matters and having knowledge of their predecessors' activism, these athletes demonstrated the disconnect existing between current black male athletes and black male athletes who participated in activist movements decades ago. As one athlete asserted about black male athlete activism today, 'some people just don't care about it I guess'. Another respondent articulated the following:

I won't say it's fallen off but because of the times we in now uh athletes don't really get too much involved in political stands and stuff like that . . . it's probably because they caught up in their sport they in because everything is more competitive.

The student-athletes provided multiple reasons that have caused this disengagement. According to one of the black athletes:

. . . values are different. Uh a lot of athletes now, especially a lot of collegiate athletes, they're more focused on ya know, tryin' to make it to the league . . . tryin' to get that . . . tryin' to get

money . . . they're lookin' at their financial standpoint as where a lot of guys back then were just tryin' to make it into certain positions. And they weren't just tryin' to make it to the league or make it to that upper level the pros . . .

At another point during this particular interview, this participant was even more specific. He explained why athletes do not engage in such activity today:

. . . you don't wanna really put your opinion on anything because you don't wanna be criticized or in turn maybe ya know if they say something about the company, about the workers back in Asia, they might ya know take their contract away.

This comment came in reference to a conversation about former NBA basketball great and sports icon, Michael Jordan's failure to speak out on the issue concerning workers employed by Nike in their Asian sweatshop factories. The athlete was referring to the black athletes who are represented by Nike and know of the situation, but choose not to say anything about the inhumane practices that are taking place. As one student-athlete stated:

I think it's the sense of entitlement. So far disconnected from the struggle that they don't really value it because the athlete before, when they made it, they really knew they made it. They were representing a community, their people, they were representing their family, they were representing a lot so they really valued their opportunity . . . I don't think there are enough athletes right now that really value what they have, the opportunity they've been given, I really don't. I think that's the biggest difference is in their behavior, all over, because if they really knew what they had, the opportunity they have, they would value it and would conduct themselves differently I believe.

These comments from our participants speak to the differences between black male athletes today and black male athletes from the Civil Rights era. This level of disconnect stated by these black male athletes corroborates statements made by Harry Edwards, Shaun Powell, and Bill Rhoden. In sum, despite the knowledge and awareness given to their predecessors, these narratives substantiated some of the critical sentiments made by these commentators.

### *Responsibility*

One final theme which materialized was the responsibility of black athletes to speak out on social issues. The participants felt because of the position athletes hold in society, they should articulate their concerns of current social injustices. One participant asserted:

They [athletes] have a bigger reach that they can affect a large audience. They're gonna influence a lot of people just because they're athletes and people embrace them.

Speaking to the reach of the black male athlete, one participant stressed that these individuals 'really need to understand the power you have . . . really understand the impact you can have on people'.

Another athlete responded with the following:

Yeah, I think that athletes should also speak out. I mean there's a right time and place for everything. Just make sure you do it when you're supposed to. I mean everyone has the right to voice their opinion, it may get negative attention or it could be positive but still I feel like as though athletes do have the right to say what's on their mind and because they're athletes in the limelight, their opinion can matter more. And if it's something for the better that they're talkin' about, then that could possibly speed the process up for something like that happening . . . something positive.

The black athletes noted how television has played a big role in this process. Because these athletes are seen on television and showcased in front of millions of people, they are more recognizable compared to ordinary individuals. One athlete remarked, 'I think their words [mean] more . . . their words would be bigger to certain people cause that's who they see every day.' The participants seem to believe there is a strong, positive correlation between media visibility and potential influence. Echoing that point, one participant spoke about the necessity for black athletes to be engaged in some type of activity that affects others.

. . . I think you have to be involved in something. What that is, and how that looks definitely needs to be something you're connected with, something that resonates with you personally, because if it doesn't resonate with you . . . then there's no point in you being involved in it. I don't know what you need to be in but you need to be in something, whether it's a charity or promoting a certain way of life, something to that effect. You should be doing something.

Many of the participants also adhered to the claim of athletes being role models for children. One of the athletes emphasized how children look up to athletes more as role models as opposed to their own parents in many cases. He further went on to comment about his experience as an athlete and speaking to elementary school children as a part of the team's community service initiative:

So a lot of times here we have guys that I mean that will go in and talk to different schools and students and you'd be surprised how many like they'll just listen even if you're not talkin' 'bout sports so it's really important for athletes to be able to communicate with the community with stuff outside of your sports.

Reverberating this opinion, another participant stated that, 'leading by example is more important than anything else. Conducting yourself in a way that is honorable, conducting yourself in a way that shows class and character.' To that end, because of the position they occupy, black male athletes have the ability to sway others' thoughts and possibly incite change.

## Discussion

This exploratory case study utilized a critical race lens to understand black male college athletes' perceptions of race and athlete activism. The themes delineated – race still

matters, knowledge and awareness, different mindset, and responsibility – illustrate these black male athletes' perceptions regarding this phenomenon of black athlete activism. Although tentative, the findings from this study offer some initial insight into a topic that has, for the most part, gone unexplored by scholars. Below, we discuss the themes and offer some theoretical, research, and practical implications. We conclude with some future considerations.

### *Theoretical implications*

We situated this exploratory case study of black male college athletes' perceptions of race and athlete activism within the framework of critical race theory, which is an analytic and explanatory tool that allows scholars to explore issues of race and racism in society, and take into account the role of institutions by drawing on the experiences and perspectives of those groups affected by racism (Hylton, 2009). There were two major tenets of CRT that were particularly pertinent to our study of these black male athletes' perspectives on the issue of black athlete activism: 1) the historical social construction of race and the embedded nature of racism in American society, and 2) the importance of (counter) narratives and voice. In this section, we attempt to briefly tie these particular tenets to the four aforementioned themes from our data, and discuss some of the theoretical, research, and practical implications.

The first theme we gathered from the data was that race still matters in American society today, thus providing support for West's (1993) contention that 'race matters' or is still an important diversity issue with which we should be concerned. Discovering that black male student-athletes believe that race plays a role in how they operate within American society and the institution of college sport offers resounding support of the main tenet of CRT, namely that racism is endemic to American culture. The participants' beliefs that race is significant because it is still used to judge people in American society today speaks to the potential pervasiveness of this diversity dimension by this most important stakeholder group. These perceptions of race and racism in society and college sport are similar to those offered by the black male athletes in Singer's (2005) study.

The second theme that emerged from the data dealt with the respondents' knowledge and awareness of previous feats of black male athlete activism. Their short narratives, in a sense, counter the perceptions conveyed by those scholars, critics, and sport journalists that today's black athlete is not cognizant of the pioneering activism of their predecessors. The athletes in our study were certainly aware of some of the seminal feats of activism, particularly the 1968 Mexico City Olympic boycott that was organized by Dr Harry Edwards and the victory stand protest by sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who raised their black-gloved fists during the playing of the national anthem to protest against the racism and unjust treatment against blacks in America during that time. In alignment with the goals of CRT, these counter-narratives provided by our participants provide an initial step in garnering a better understanding of today's black athletes' knowledge of athlete activism and the role it has played historically and in the present day. They at least reveal that, contrary to popular belief, today's elite black male college athlete has some awareness of these important events and the implications they have for today's black athlete. However, the disconnect lies in the fact that while these athletes are aware of

various achievements of black male athlete activists, in most instances, today's black male athlete has not really immersed himself in any substantial social causes like his counterparts from the past.

In this regard, the third theme delineated from the data refers to the disconnected mindset between black male athletes in the current era and black male athletes of the Civil Rights era. The similarity between black male athletes then and now is both parties were/are seemingly aware of the varying degrees of social injustices; however, the disconnect occurs because there were considerably more black male athletes during the Civil Rights era who organized and participated in protests hoping to incite much needed social change. In line with the perspectives of sport journalists such as Powell (2008) and Rhoden (2006), our data suggest today's black male athletes have a greater desire to rest on the laurels of their predecessors, and are exceedingly more focused on furthering their personal careers and financial bottom lines rather than pursuing endeavors which potentially could evolve into measurable social change.

Related to the points above, the fourth and final theme from our study suggests black athletes of today have a responsibility to engage in activism. Interestingly, although this perception is there, at least within this small sample of participants from this one college sport program, there does not appear to be a great number of these athletes lining up to take on various social causes today. From a CRT perspective, it is important to reflect on how history and context might not only influence today's black male athletes' perceptions of his responsibility to engage in activism, but also his desire to use his athlete status to become actively involved in the actual process of social change. CRT is an activist movement emerging during a time in American history (i.e. the Civil Rights era) when perhaps black male athletes felt not only did they have a responsibility to engage in activism, but also not much of a choice. The time period and context in which they participated in sport was vastly different from that of today's black male athlete, and this certainly could have an impact on this current generation of black male athletes' motivation to engage in activist activity. We will further elaborate on this point in our discussion of the future research considerations.

## Implications and conclusion

From a research perspective, scholars should strongly consider utilizing a CRT framework in conjunction with some qualitative research designs (see Creswell, 2007) in efforts to generate important practical knowledge (i.e. knowledge grounded in the actual thoughts and words of a subjugated group) and emancipatory knowledge (i.e. knowledge that empowers and challenges people of color to engage in the change process) (see Kershaw, 1992). For example, scholars might wish to conduct more case studies in efforts to develop an in-depth understanding of a case or multiple cases where the unit of analysis is one particular black athlete, a group of black athletes that are involved in a particular program or event, or black athletes that are affiliated with a particular sport organization such as a university athletic program or other organizations at different levels of the sport industry (e.g. interscholastic sport, intercollegiate athletics, professional sport).

Scholars may well consider conducting ethnographic case studies as another potentially strong research design for studying this topic. For example, scholars might contemplate

immersing themselves in the culture of a particular sport organization for an extended period of time, and focus on describing and interpreting the shared patterns of culture of the group. Furthermore, because this topic of athlete activism has received scant attention in the academic literature, a grounded theory approach could emerge out of the study of this topic with black male athletes. Scholars could conduct multiple interviews with several black male athletes across various organizational contexts in efforts to move toward a theory of black athlete activism.

Scholars might also consider taking a phenomenological approach to the study of this topic of black athlete activism. This would most likely require scholars to identify those black athletes, past and present, who have taken a visible stance against some issue or experienced the actual phenomenon of athlete activism and the residual effects or outcomes associated with it. Finally, a participatory action research (PAR) (see Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005) approach would also provide scholars with fruitful avenues through which to study this diversity issue of black athlete activism. This approach to research is important because it would allow black male athletes and other potential research participants to take on shared ownership of the research topic and process which would certainly be in alignment with the activist and social movement of CRT.

From a practical standpoint, this examination of our participants' perspectives on race and athlete activism has a few implications for sport and educational practitioners. Such a study has the potential to illuminate black athletes' disposition towards the injustices and inequalities that continue to cast a shadow over American society and the institution of sport. As illustrated by our participants' responses, racism continues to persist in American society, and the recent election of President Barack Obama, does not insinuate that the systemic practices of racism engrained in American society will, or has, come to a halt. To be sure, a distinction can be made between the racial injustices taking place decades ago (typically overt) compared to the practices now (typically covert) (Feagin, 2006); however, these athletes' perspectives suggest issues of race, racism, and racial diversity in sport and society should continue to be vigorously studied as we move forward in the 21st century.

There are certainly some practical implications worthy of discussion. Because the black male athlete comprises a substantial number of participants in track and field and the two dominant, revenue-generating sports (i.e. basketball and [American] football) those who manage these athletic departments should be sensitive to the needs and concerns of this primary stakeholder group. In particular, black males in this study as well as others (see Singer, 2005, 2009) are not oblivious to the fact that while they are given opportunities to participate as athletes in these colleges and universities, there still remains a negligibly low number of black males who have been given the opportunity to be in senior level management positions (i.e. athletic administrators and head coaches).

The black male athlete is arguably the most important stakeholder of these athletic departments within big-time college sport programs because it is their talent, image, and likeness these organizations are selling to the various consumer groups (e.g. the media, fans, alumni, and donors). Therefore, those who are responsible for the management of these college sport organizations should be careful not to negatively exploit these individuals or disrespect and disregard the perspectives of this valuable group of human resources. Educators, coaches, and management should not discourage black male

athletes from exploring various social causes, or view those athletes who might choose to be outspoken on relevant social issues as a threat to their financial bottom line. Instead, in alignment with the stated mission of intercollegiate athletics, these 'student-athletes' should be encouraged to expand their horizons beyond the domain of sport and play.

In conclusion, despite the fact our exploratory case study was (de) limited because we only conducted single interviews with a small group of black male athletes at one particular American university, it provided an important first step in capturing the voices of this most important stakeholder group of college sport in particular. In fact, our initial attempt at studying this particular diversity issue was crucial to helping us uncover further questions and concerns scholars might consider as they attempt to better understand the topic of athlete activism as well as other pertinent issues related to the experiences of black athletes in sport organizations. From this perspective, it provides sport sociologists and other researchers with a starting point for the investigation and understanding of this important racial diversity issue in educational and sport contexts.

### Appendix: Interview guide

1. How important is your racial identity to you? How would you identify yourself racially? (Why?)
2. From your perspective, how important has 'race' been throughout American history? Is it important today? Does 'race' matter in 2008 and beyond? (Why or why not?)
3. What is your understanding of the role played by athletes (black/African American) in the Civil Rights Movement? (Who were some of these athletes, and how did they contribute to the movement?)
4. Living the life of a 1960s athlete, do you think you would have stood up for certain causes? (Why or why not?)
5. What is your perception of the black/African American athlete today? How might he/she be different from or similar to yesteryears' athlete? If any, what role should he play as it relates to addressing larger societal issues? Does he/she have a responsibility to speak to certain issues in society today? (Why?)

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