Race, Framing, and Student-Athlete Compensation

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A considerable amount of research has analyzed the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I football as an industry, yet little has focused on how race and perceptions of student-athletes may affect policies within this billion dollar industry. The member institutions of the NCAA annually garner billions of dollars in revenue through ticket sales, sport related merchandise, and lucrative television deals (Branch, 2011). Much of this money has been used to pay inflated coaches salaries or allocated to funding new facilities. However, few administrators entertain the idea of using this money to further compensate student-athletes.

Though researchers and practitioners have debated the issue of whether to pay college athletes, few have considered how the racialized nature of sport may have impacted both implementation and perceptions of these policy changes (Aaseng, 2003; Halone, 2008). According to the Zgonc (2010), African American student-athletes are now the majority (45.8 percent) within Division I football, a feat previously unobserved in the 11 years since the inaugural NCAA student-athlete ethnicity report. These findings are especially noteworthy considering the racial demographics of male student-athletes within the NCAA as a whole are still overwhelmingly White (64.7%). Noting that a large percentage of revenue in college sport is generated by Division I football, and the majority of these players are African American, understanding how participant race influences people’s perceptions of the fairness of athlete compensation is critical. Specifically, the literature of racial threat hypothesis (Tolbert & Grummel, 2003; Ogorzalek, 2009) suggests that participants will view African American student-athletes more negatively in regard to compensation compared to their White counterparts.

Threat hypothesis suggests that the current systems are widely accepted as fair, as long as they maintain the power ideologies of the status quo. Within the sport context, African Americans are seen as the laborers, while Whites, who hold a vast majority of administrative positions, are the benefactors (Glaser & Gilens, 1997; Hawkins, 2002). Thus, we suspect that African American football players will be viewed negatively when seeking increased compensation, as this may be perceived as a threat in power to the White majority (Hypothesis 1).

Drawing from framing literature (Holladay & Quinones; 2005), the negative attributes afforded compensation to African American student-athletes may be buffered by framing compensation in a way that the benefit is not only to the student athlete, but encompass pro-social ideals of fairness. Therefore, we predict that people will view compensation for African American student-athletes more positively if the benefits are framed to benefit society and American ideals of equality and fairness compared to athlete benefit (Hypothesis 2).

Hypotheses will be tested through a 2 (race: African American, White) x 2 (beneficiary: athlete, general society). Approximately 200 undergraduate students at a large southern university will be randomly assigned packets containing information about student-athlete compensation. A brief description of a new compensatory program for student athletes, accompanied with a picture of a student-athlete (African American or White) and information about the benefits of the program (athlete as beneficiary or societal beneficiary) will be provided in the packets. Participants will then be asked a variety of questions regarding perceptions of athlete compensation by using Colquitt’s (2001) fairness scale. Measurements of social dominance orientation (SDO) and openness to experience (OTE) will also be used as these have been found to impact worldviews and perceptions of equality (Cokley e al., 2010; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; McCrae, 1994).

First, using SPSS, means and standard deviations will be computed for all variables. Second, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) will be used to test the hypotheses. This study combines framing literature and racial threat hypothesis to examine how perceptions of race and fairness impact views of compensation in a previously unexplored way. Findings from this study will potentially impact how the NCAA will be able to frame their new transitions in compensation in a more favorable light, as they have recently received a substantial amount of backlash from their announcement to increase compensation for student-athletes (NCAA, 2011).