The Value of Qualitative Approaches in the Examination of Black Male Student Athletes

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The purpose of this article is to describe the value added by employing qualitative research methods in the examination of Black male student athletes’ experiences in academic and athletic contexts. Guided by a constructivist epistemology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), a select number of exemplar studies in the sport management literature are highlighted to illustrate the benefits of qualitative research methods in understanding Black male student athletes’ experiences in different educational settings. The qualitative approaches incorporated in these studies included focus groups, individual interviews, photo/visual elicitation, participant observations, and document reviews. The quality of each study was analyzed using Tracy’s (2010) eight criteria for quality in qualitative research: 1) worthy topic, 2) rich rigor, 3) sincerity, 4) credibility, 5) resonance, 6) significant contribution, 7) ethics, and 8) meaningful coherence. Collectively, these qualitative studies provide unique insight into key influences that facilitate and inhibit Black male student athletes’ positive developmental outcomes in college.

At institutions of higher education in the United States (U.S.), marginalized groups such as Black male student athletes have historically faced unique challenges such as encounters with racial discrimination, social isolation, academic neglect, economic deprivation, and limited leadership opportunities (Cooper, 2012). In an effort to address these challenges, qualitative research methods provide vital insight into understanding the complex socialization processes these student athletes experience at postsecondary institutions. Contrary to the positivistic paradigm, several sport management scholars have found qualitative approaches to be particularly useful in examining the impact of institutional cultures on Black student athletes’ experiences (Harper, 2012; Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Singer, 2005a). Moreover, qualitative approaches used in race-based research challenge what Scheurich and Young (1997) described as “epistemological racism” (p. 4). Historically, research on race and ethnicity in the U.S. have been based on views of the dominant culture, which has primarily been the White Anglo Saxon male perspective (Ahmad, 1993; Andersen, 1993; hooks, 1992; Serrant-Green, 2002). In other words, raced and raced-gendered epistemologies (e.g., positivism) are grounded in a myopic foundation of knowledge that privileges the social, historical, and cultural experiences of Whites (Bernal, 2002; Stanfield, 1994). Hendrix (2002) argued these traditional research methods do not facilitate and may even suppress research on race and ethnicity. The implicit and explicit message embedded in dominant epistemological and methodological approaches is the notion that researching ethnic minorities (e.g., Blacks) is research about the ‘other’ (Ahmad, 1993; Serrant-Green, 2002, Troyna, 1993; Troyna & Griffiths, 1995). The positioning of ethnic minorities as the ‘other’ reinforces epistemological racism through the normalization of White standards, values, and perspectives (Serrant-Green, 2002).

As a result, the purpose of this article is to describe the value added by employing qualitative research methods in the examination of Black male student athletes’ experiences in academic and athletic contexts. It is important to not the author acknowledges the benefits of both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Both forms of inquiry, independently and collaboratively, serve vital purposes in the construction and expansion of knowledge. Each method possesses unique strengths, which contribute to the understanding of different phenomena (Creswell, 2009; Greene, 2007). For example, there are several quantitative studies that have provided valuable insight into understanding Black male student athletes’ experiences in college, yet these studies were limited in their ability to investigate questions regarding “how” and “why” the identified outcomes manifested (Gaston-Gayles, 2004; Pascarella et al., 1999; Potuto & O’Hanlon, 2006; Sedlacek & Adams-Gaston, 1992; Sellers, 1992; Sellers & Chavous, 1997; Young and Sowa, 1992). This article will highlight a select number of exemplar studies in the sport management literature that incorporated qualitative approaches (e.g., focus groups, individual interviews, photo/visual elicitation, participant observations, and document reviews) in the examination of Black male student athletes’ experiences in academic and athletic contexts (Adler & Adler, 1991; Benson, 2000; Comeaux, 2010; Cooper & Hawkins, 2012; Donnor, 2005; Harrison & Lawrence, 2003; Harrison & Martin, 2012; Lawrence, 2005; Martin & Harris, 2006; Singer, 2005b). The findings from each of these qualitative studies provide insight into effective...
strategies and best institutional practices that contribute to Black male student athletes’ positive developmental outcomes (e.g., academic achievement, psychosocial development, career preparation, etc.).