
Anthony J. Weems, Texas A&M University
John N. Singer (Advisor), Texas A&M University

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Sporting events and sport organizations provide fertile social contexts to critically examine certain dominant narratives or discourses that exist in broader societies. One such dominant discourse that exists in the U.S. is the popular belief that the victory of the National Football League’s (NFL) New England Patriots in Super Bowl XXXVI (February 3, 2002) signified the unification of the nation coping with the tragic events of September 11, 2001 (also known as 9/11) (Martin & Breitenfeldt, 2008; Miller, 2002; O’Brien, 2002; Shapiro, 2002). This triumph of the Patriots in one of the most popular sporting events in the world evoked an “unbridled patriotism” (Shapiro, 2002, p. A1) and sense of national identity and pride among people in the U.S. who viewed the victory as a preordained destiny or fate (Berkrot, 2002; Weiss, 2002).

In discussing some major legitimations of sport in his Zeigler address, Chalip (2006) identified national identity and pride as one example that’s been espoused concerning sport’s potential to bestow good public outcomes. But was the New England Patriot’s victory in Super Bowl XXXVI and the “unbridled patriotism” that flowed from it a positive example of how sport might be used to promote national identity and pride? Chalip (2006) acknowledged the potential role sport could play in actually invoking negative characteristics sometimes associated with nationalism, and challenged sport management scholars to “learn how variations in context, symbols, and narratives evoke variations in the ways that sport is interpreted and in the ways that national identity is therefore sensed” (p. 9). In this presentation, we accept this challenge set forth by Chalip (2006). As recommended by Frisby (2005) in her Zeigler address, we embrace a critical social science (CSS) perspective in arguing that the dominant discourse that arose from Super Bowl XXXVI was an incomplete exegesis that romanticized the context surrounding the Super Bowl and overplayed the role of sport in uniting and healing a nation post-9/11.

Some of our colleagues in sport sociology have offered critical interpretations of the discourse surrounding Super Bowl XXXVI and American football more broadly. Silk and Falcous (2005) revealed the discourse surrounding this event points towards a nationalist propaganda display on behalf of the socio-political elite through a selective narrative of American history that contributed to support for the War on Terror. Other scholars focused on how the discourse surrounding Super Bowls and NFL games post 9/11 helped contribute to a culture of militarism in the U.S. (Stempel, 2006; Schimmel, 2011; Fischer, 2014). Fischer (2014) also discussed how this discourse helped facilitate the formation of a neo-ethnic American identity and the creation of the aberrant other in people of Middle Eastern descent.

The purpose of our presentation is to build upon the work above by explicitly analyzing Super Bowl XXXVI and the New England Patriots as a racialized, discursive space. We respond to the call by sport management scholars to embrace critical, race-based epistemologies and research (Armstrong, 2011; Singer, 2005) by applying the theoretical concept of the white racial frame (Feagin, 2013) as a lens to critically analyze the discursive narrative of Super Bowl XXXVI and the New England Patriot’s victory. Adding a racial component to the (re)interpretation of this sporting event and sport organization offers an alternative perspective and more comprehensive understanding of the discourse and how this discourse evoked certain variations in the way American national identity was sensed post-9/11.

Harmonious with the white racial frame as a theoretical concept, this research utilized a critical discourse analysis (CDA) methodology as the overarching discourse of Super Bowl XXXVI is deconstructed through the lens of the white racial frame. The white racial frame is a central component of systemic racism theory (Feagin, 2006) and can be defined as “an organized set of racialized ideas, stereotypes, emotions, and inclinations to discriminate” (p. 25). The framework consists of several key elements: stereotypes and ideologies, racial interpretations and narratives, images and accents, emotions, inclination to take action (to discriminate). It also consists of two subframes,
including the anti-other subframe and the pro-white subframe, the latter being the focus of this presentation. The pro-white subframe “assertively accents a positive view of white superiority, virtue, moral goodness, and action” (Feagin, 2013, p. 10). CDA is “a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (Van Dijk, 2003, p. 352). Critical discourse analysts take an explicit position, seeking to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality (Van Dijk, 2013). Because the white racial frame is a naturalized worldview (Feagin, 2013), a CDA paves the way for illuminating this framing within the overarching discourse surrounding white patriotism.

The scope of the data analyzed includes: NFL Classics replay of the Fox broadcast of Super Bowl XXXVI, Sky Sports broadcast of Super Bowl XXXVI, the New England Patriots Super Bowl champions commemorative DVD (NFL Productions), History of the New England Patriots (NFL Productions). The primary author took the lead by watching the broadcasts and DVDs several times, and then taking copious notes while situating the analysis within the tenets of the white racial frame. The secondary author also watched the broadcasts and DVDs, and engaged in multiple discussions with the primary author to arrive at the findings. Broadly speaking, our findings reveal a discourse surrounding Super Bowl XXXVI and the New England Patriots that was tacitly housed in the white racial frame so as to rationalize the events of 9/11 and provide appropriate reactions for America(ns) that were in line with the agenda of the political elite (i.e., “War on Terror”). The discussion of our findings will focus on the organizational narrative and the meaning behind what it means to be a New England “Patriot”, and how the notion of “Patriotism” was interpreted in this post-9/11 context. We will also discuss how we applied each tenet of the white racial frame to deconstruct and counter the dominant narratives surrounding this sporting event and sport organization.

In sum, this research has important implications for the field of sport management. Our research answered Chalip’s (2006) call for sport management scholars to identify and probe factors that might facilitate or inhibit optimization of sport’s positive contribution to national identity and pride. Critically analyzing Super Bowl XXXVI and the New England Patriots through the white racial frame uncovered how this particular sporting event and sport organization contributed to a nationalism rooted in an “us” versus “them” narrative (i.e., “Americans” versus non-white, “terrorists” or racialized “other”) that did not necessarily unite the nation. In this regard, there is a need for more critical, race-based research that continues to interrogate how organizational narratives in sport might impact issues of national identity and pride.