Multiracial Athletes and Racial Injustice: An Examination of Athlete Activism

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As scholars have noted, athletes in the United States (U.S.) have increased their activism over the last 4-5 years (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017; Cooper, Macaulay & Rodriguez, 2017; Frederick, Sanderson & Schlereth, 2017). This increase in activism has become particularly visible in regard to the issue of racial injustice. Beyond the well-documented protests led by Colin Kaepernick in the NFL, NBA players (including LeBron James and Dwayne Wade) and WNBA players (such as Tina Charles and Nneka Ogwumike) have notably used their platforms to call attention to and encourage action against racial injustices. With the public focus on this issue, this study looks to extend the scholarship on modern athlete activism by examining the intersection of racial injustice, athlete activism, and multiracial athletes.

Understanding one’s racial identity is a dynamic, unique, lifelong process for multiracial people (Brunsma, Delgado, & Rockquemore, 2013; Herman, 2004; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002; Shih & Sanchez, 2005). The process is informed by a myriad of factors including sociohistorical context (Renn, 2004), geography (Brunsma, 2006), as well as the influence of peers (Renn, 2004) and family (Brunsma, 2006; Renn 2004). Brunsma and colleagues (2013) further suggest the racial identity of multiracial people can not only evolve over time, but may also vary by context. This could, for example, lead an individual with Black and White racial heritage to identify as socially multiracial, politically black, culturally multiracial, physically white, and formally multiracial. In addition to their self-identified racial identity, multiracial individuals can be publicly defined by their racial identification. Racial identification is defined as how society perceives an individual’s race (Rockquemore, Brunsma & Delgado, 2009) and that identification may not align with an individual’s racial identity (Gaskins, 1999).

The United States is a highly racialized society that has predominantly defined race in monoracial terms (e.g. Asian, Black, White). As such, there have been questions as to where multiracial people fit the country’s racial structures (Kang & Bodenhausen, 2015; Rockquemore, et al., 2009). Kang and Bodenhausen (2015) have eloquently summarized the issue: “Multiple identities are challenging for social perceivers because they are related to disfluency in categorization, increased propensities for categorizing unclear cases into devalued social categories, and subsequent biased evaluations and behavior” (2015, p. 566). While these issues of racial identification have more to do with the perceptions of others than multiracial individuals themselves (Gaskins, 1999), the cognitive dissonance speaks to greater questions as to what space multiracial individuals are perceived to have in the greater racial discourse.

In the last year, discussions of race and racial injustice have been impossible to separate from sport. As previously indicated, the breadth of the protests has indicated that athletes are willing to speak out against racial injustices. The protests and the responses to the protests, coupled with a rise in public gatherings of white supremacist groups, have also placed the deep racial divide that exists in the United States back in the headlines of the news (e.g. NPR, the Washington Post, and ABC). Though some multiracial people identity shift in situations like this where one of an individual’s racial identities is devalued (Wilton, Sanchez, & Garcia, 2013), identity shifting does not address the underlying issue that one’s racial identities may be on differing sides of a conflict and the individual faces potential rejection from each of their racial groups (Gibbs, 1987).

Given this context - the unique aspects of racial identity and racial identification of multiracial athletes, as well as the current sociopolitical climate - this study looks to add to the extant scholarship through an exploratory examination of the racial activism of current multiracial athletes. The research questions guiding this examination are as follows:

RQ1: Are multiracial athletes speaking out on issues of racial injustice?
RQ2: Are multiracial athletes in specific sports more likely to speak out on issues of racial injustice?

RQ3: How is the public responding to the activism of multiracial athletes?

RQ4: How are multiracial athletes incorporating aspects of their unique racial experience in their activism?

As social media has become a commonly used tool in social and political movements (Sanderson, Frederick, & Stocz, 2016; Schmittel & Sanderson, 2015), this study will address the research questions by conducting a qualitative examination of the Twitter accounts of multiracial professional athletes. Tweets by the athletes between August 2017 and December 2017 and the responses to those tweets will constitute the data set for this study. The academic literature and carefully selected media sources will be used to offer context in the analysis. Following the established methodologies of scholars who have conducted similar examinations of activism employing social media (Sanderson, Frederick, & Stocz, 2016; Schmittel & Sanderson, 2015), inductive reasoning will be used to conduct a thematic analysis in order to address the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analyses will be guided by Rockquemore and colleagues’ (2009) update of Thornton and Wallace’s (1995) framework of multiracial identity, Brunsma and colleagues’ (2013) multiracial identity matrix, critical race theory (Singer, 2005), and social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

A preliminary list of American multiracial athletes in both team and individual sports has been compiled. Data collection will commence in December. The results of this study will address a gap in the literature by offering a focused examination of the space multiracial athletes occupy in the ever-expanding discourse of race, racism, and racial activism in U.S. sport. Furthermore, the results offer additional clarity regarding the influence of teams and governing bodies in athlete activism and responses to athlete activism across a variety of sports.