Perceptions of Whiteness: Exploring the Narratives of College Athletes

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When situated in the sporting context, Whites may be forced to acknowledge and henceforth reconcile their unconscious racialized biases, the realization of which can lead individuals to the point of denying not only one’s own racial identity, but also the racial reality of racially marginalized communities (Sue, 2011). This realization serves to reflect the tensions that White individuals experience as dominant social group members, which by extension can be reproduced by White athletes within the college sporting context. Moreover, extant research has identified the challenges that Black college athletes face in navigating spaces that are shaped by and privilege whiteness (Bimper, Harrison, & Clark, 2012), as well as the negative experiential effects of color-blind racism and post-racial narratives (Bimper, 2015). However, lacking is a more explicit examination of the perspectives of Black college athletes as it relates to hegemonic whiteness and White racial identity within college sport.

Research focusing on race-related matters such as perceived notions of racial superiority in athletics (Harrison, Azzarito, & Burden, 2004) have been examined from the perspectives of Whites. As a result, the perspective of the Black college athlete has been either minimized or overlooked in the examination of their racial counterparts, particularly as to how whiteness actively shapes and preserves color-blind ideology in sporting culture. Although comparative analyses of identity sources among Black and White college athletes (Brown et al., 2003; Henry & Closson, 2012) provide insightful appraisals on the intersection of whiteness and college sport, such remain cursory at best. Therefore, the aims of this study, through a curation of the narratives of Black and White college athletes, are twofold:

(1) To better understand how Whites confront their whiteness and perceive the relative significance of being White within the college sporting context, and

(2) To center and legitimate the experiences and voices of Black college athletes as it pertains to the normative, pervasive influence of whiteness

Our inquiry approach is an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which attempts to examine a participant’s perception of a personal, lived experience. The sole source of data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with each college athlete. Thus far, six interviews have been completed with Division I college athletes (four White female, two White male), lasting between 28 and 42 minutes. At the time of abstract submission, four more interviews were scheduled to take place (two Black male, one Black female, one White female). While IPA is not a prescriptive methodology, analysis is interpretative such that there is an expectation of constant comparison of transcript data. As a result, preliminary analysis has revealed common emergent themes such as: the intersections between racial identity, racialized experience, and personal understandings of whiteness; understanding whiteness as dull, lacking, and/or incomplete; the “color capital” of Black athletes; and the removal of personal implication from structural forms of oppression.