

# Theorizing on the Stereotyping of Black Male Student-Athletes

## Issues and Implications

**Abstract** Since the 19th century to present day, stereotyping of Black male athletes has depicted them as athletically superior while intellectually inferior to White male athletes (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004). In this paper, the purpose is to theorize on the race-based stereotyping of Black male student-athletes at the collegiate level. Our comments are situated in the tenets of psychological critical race theory (Jones, 1998) as we discuss racial, social, economical, cultural, and psychological [stereotyping] factors that affect Black male student-athletes' academic and athletic experiences. Implications and challenges around these issues are discussed for academic faculty, coaches, advisors, and support personnel as they assume responsibility for teaching, coaching, advising, and supporting student-athletes' academic progress.

"Haven't you ever wondered why the [W]hite man genuinely applauds a [B]lack man who achieves excellence with his body in the field of sports, while he hates to see a [B]lack man achieve excellence in his mind" (Cleaver, 1968, p. 151). Historically situated and contentious, the preceding quote nonetheless is an appropriate start to this discussion on race and racism, and stereotyping of Black student-athletes in the United States (US). Our purpose in this paper is to theorize on the stereotyping of Black male student-athletes at the collegiate level.

The first Black athletes to become dominant sport figures in the US were boxers. For example, Jack Johnson won the world heavyweight championship. Black athletes such as Johnson fought other Black boxers and less often fought White boxers in the 1890s and 1900s (Reese, 1998). Since then, many researchers have espoused and debated a mix of anthropometrical (Spurgeon & Meredith, 1980), biological, kinesiological, and physiological (Entine, 2000; Kane, 1971), cultural and social (Edwards, 2000; Goldsmith, 2003; Harrison, Azzarito, & Burden, 2004), and psychological and sociological (Harrison, 1995, 2001; Harrison, Harrison, & Moore, 2002) explanations on Black male athletes' dominance in selected sports (e.g., basketball, boxing, football, track and field; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Miller, 1998; Wig-

gins, 1989). It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss each of these many debates. But the reader should read papers by David K. Wiggins (1989) and Patrick B. Miller (1998) devoted to the various debates waged on this topic.

Less debatable is the argument that the US has an insidious legacy of racial stratifications and inequalities due to the pervasiveness and permanency of racism (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). Historically, legalized segregation subjected Black people to political, moral, social, educational, economical, and legal injustices (Massey & Denton, 1993). America has moved from legalized segregation and discrimination based on race and racism to 'us' and 'them' inequalities, which are influenced by and influences racial stratifications (Loury, 2002). The well-documented history of racism in the US is also manifested in the stereotyping of Blacks in collegiate sports (Brooks & Althouse, 2000; Sailes, 1991, 1993; Singer, 2005). From a critical race perspective (Ladson-Billings, 1998), we submit that it is the persistence of this troubled past and present day manifestations of racism and stereotypic beliefs in collegiate sports that warrant further commentary (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004).

Since the nineteenth century and still today, lingering stereotypic beliefs about Blacks depict them as athletically superior while intellectually inferior to Whites (Harrison, 2001; Harrison et al., 2002; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Kane, 1971; Miller, 1998; Sailes, 1993; Wiggins, 1989). Race-based stereotypic beliefs have present day implications such as imposing psychological barriers on performance that potentially reduce a student-athlete's ability to perform to his potential (Donnor, 2005; Singer, 2005; Stone, Lynch, Sjomeling, & Darley, 1999). On this point, Stone et al. (1999) asserted that athletic performance is impeded out of concern about confirming a negative stereotype which "increases anxiety and in part because it creates self-doubt about the ability to perform" (p. 1224). Research supports the plausibility that regarding student-athletes, particularly Black males, negative stereotypic beliefs about their intelligence can lead them to lower their expectations in academic contexts (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Stone et al., 1999). Thus, it is important that academic faculty, coaches, academic advisors, and support personnel understand how race-sport stereotypes can influence the aspirations of youth toward or away from various athletic pursuits at the expense of their academic success (Harrison et al., 2004; Harrison, Lee, & Belcher, 1999).

From a critical race perspective, we focus this paper on the social and psychological construction of race, racism, and stereotyping as associated with historical and contemporary factors (social, economical, cultural, and psychological) that influence Black male student-athletes' athletic and academic experiences. These factors continue to influence Black and other youth to participate or *not* participate in selected sports (Harrison et al., 2004; Harrison et al., 1999). Later, implications and future challenges around these issues are discussed for colleges and universities as they have responsibility for student-athletes on their campuses. In the next section, we discuss the

theoretical framework of critical race theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and an extension of CRT—psychological critical race theory (Jones, 1998), which situates our perspectives.

## Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory

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In collegiate sports, scholars have by and large neglected to adequately represent the voices and lived experiences of Black student-athletes (Benson, 2000; Bruening, 2005). To counter marginalizing of Blacks and other persons of color, CRT focuses on social justice and equity, with particular attention given to the intersection of racialized groups and contextual variables (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Duncan, 2005; Jay, 2003).

CRT emerged as a counter legal epistemology to positivist and liberal legal discourse of civil rights (Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT has expanded beyond the initial legal discourse into several disciplines including education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), psychology (Jones, 1998), and sports (Donnor, 2005; Singer, 2005). In education, CRT is used to analyze social justice and racial equity in schools and schooling processes (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Jay, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2000). The tenets of CRT include: (a) the permanence of racism in America, (b) counter-storytelling, (c) Whiteness as property, (d) the principle of interest convergence, and (e) the critique of liberalism (see DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2000; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Owing to the legal and educational CRT discourse on race and racism in the US, social psychologist, James Jones proposed a psychological version of CRT. Specifically, Jones (1998) introduced psychological critical race theory (PCRT) "as a way of accounting for the role of social psychological processes in continuing racial disparities" (p. 641). PCRT is a way to explain racial attitudes, race-relations, and persistent racial inequalities. Of most relevance to this paper, PCRT is an appropriate framework for analyzing the role of social and psychological processes on race-based stereotypic beliefs. PCRT offers five major tenets in the explanation of social psychological processes which often perpetuate racial disparities as: (a) spontaneous and persistent influences of race, (b) fairness is derived from divergent racial experiences, (c) asymmetrical consequences of racial politics, (d) paradoxes of racial diversity, and (e) salience of racial identity (Jones, 1998).

The first tenet, *spontaneous and persistent influences of race*, asserts that there are three factors pertinent to the psychological construction of *race*, which is socially constructed and spontaneously activated in cognition. The argument that race is a social construct insists that it is more of a *man* conceived human categorizing system, than a genetically-based human condition. Put differently, "race is a cultural invention, a culturally and historically specific way

of thinking about, categorizing, and treating human beings" (Mukhopadhyay & Henze, 2003, p. 673). First in this tenet of PCRT, individuals naturally tend to categorize things; including people, this sustains racial categories. Second, knowledge of race-based stereotypes is pervasive and well embedded in cognition. Third, knowledge of stereotypes can and often has automatic influences on beliefs, judgments, and even behaviors. For example, the University of Notre Dame's legendary football player and alumnus Paul Hornung's remark that, "the school needs to lower academic standards to 'get the black athlete' [e.g., football players] ...if we're going to compete" was considered by some as espousing racist stereotypic beliefs (Whiteside, 2004). The stereotypic belief that Blacks are athletically superior but intellectually inferior to Whites and vice versa (Coakley, 2004), plus other factors such as socioeconomic status and cultural norms, continue to influence youth to participate or *not* participate in selected sport activities (Harrison et al., 2004). In PCRT, whether knowingly or unknowingly, espousing stereotypic beliefs accentuate perceived similarities and differences between racial groups (Jones, 1998).

The second tenet, *fairness and divergent racial experiences*, implies that the social construction of race means that diverse groups inevitably view fairness differently. Thus, the beliefs of fairness are not consistent across racial lines and the psychological experience of fairness has not kept pace with the measurable indices of progress in US society (Jones, 1998). For instance, Black student-athletes have voiced concerns that racism is manifested in Blacks being (a) stereotyped as more athletic but less intelligent and as a result denied access to leadership positions on and off the playing field, and (b) treated differently than White student-athletes (Lawrence, 2005; Singer, 2005). Black student-athletes' divergent racial experiences at predominantly White institutions of higher education (PW-IHE) are a concern (Benson, 2000; Brooks & Althouse, 2000; Donnor, 2005; Lawrence, 2005; Singer, 2005).

In accord with the third tenet, *asymmetrical consequences of racial policies*, racial groups diverge, as a consequence of their "calculations of costs and benefits of racial policies" and "color-blind strategies violate this asymmetry principle" (Jones, 1998, p. 653). For targets of racial discrimination, critical race theorists assert that acting as if race does not matter, when in fact it does, places one susceptible to missed opportunities and acceptance of a notion whose very enunciation puts one in a 'one-down' position (Jones, 1998). In sports, Blacks are generally considered at a 'one-down' position when it comes to securing head coaching positions at PW-IHE, particularly at the Division I-A level (Coakley, 2004; Walker, 2005). At such institutions, there is an under-representation of Blacks in sport leadership positions. This is manifested at the collegiate level owing to a history of race-based stereotypic beliefs and the "good old boy" network, as today there are few Black coaches in Division I-A basketball and even less so in football (Walker, 2005; Wieberg, 2006b). Although at the Division I-A level almost 50% of the foot-

ball players are Black, less than 6% of the 119 head football coaches are Black (Walker, 2005; Wieberg, 2006b).

In PCRT, policies of race neutrality (e.g., so called "colorblind" admission policies) have aversive consequences for targets of racial discrimination. For Black students who hope to one day attend a PW-IHE, policies of race neutrality can have far reaching consequences. Today, discrepancies exist at PW-IHE as admission officials grapple with the issue of whether to consider race in their admission decisions. For example, the University of Texas has adopted race-neutral admission policies. This has adversely influenced Black student admissions (Dickson, 2006). In contrast, the University of Georgia considers race as an admissions factor (Lum, 2005). Both race-neutral and race-conscious admission policies can be in compliance with the U.S. Supreme Court rulings in light of the University of Michigan cases (i.e., *Gratz v. Bolling* and *Grutter v. Bollinger*) allowing race to be used as a factor. In those cases, the U.S. Supreme Court on June 23, 2003 ruled that race and ethnicity among other factors can be taken into account in the admission process, but racial quotas are prohibited (American Council on Education, 2003). Still today, however, colleges and universities lack consensus on the issue of race-neutral versus race-conscious admission policies (Hodges, Harrison, Burden, & Dixson, 2008).

The fourth tenet, *paradoxes of racial diversity*, indicates that race is "both less and more than it seems" (Jones, 1998, p. 653). In sports, race becomes both more and less than what it seems. It seems more than what it is in the stereotypic belief that Black athletes dominate sports in the US, partly due to their presence and successes at the collegiate level as well as professionally in the National Basketball Association (NBA) and National Football League (NFL). It seems less salient with the dominant group, White athletes, who actually dominate most sports at the collegiate and professional levels (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004).

Steele and his colleagues have found that the salience of racial stereotypes can adversely affect a person's academic and athletic performance (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Stone et al., 1999). Jones (1998) stated that *out-group* "homogeneity supports the social significance of race, yet psychological and behavioral facts attest to significant heterogeneity within racial groups" (pp. 653-654). He also said as people try to suppress racial influences in their judgments, it is possible that they make race even more salient cognitively, resulting in a 'rebound' effect, which heightens racial salience on those occasions where suppression becomes no longer compulsory. As race is a social construct, it is possible to create racial groups whose members have multiple commonalties; and in so doing, racial dimensions recede in importance. For sports, racial dimensions appear to recede in importance for teammates during game competition as winning becomes the most important priority.

Lastly, *salience of racial identity*, Jones (1998) explained that racial identity is often a source of in-group pride and out-group hostility. For instance, often a source of in-group pride, Ogden and Hilt (2003) state that Blacks *consume* basketball and use it as a part of their culture and group identity. They credit the *consumption* of basketball with social and cultural influences to include: (a) societal [stereotypic] expectations of Blacks to pursue basketball, (b) prevalence of Black role models in basketball at the collegiate and professional levels, and (c) perceptions of some Blacks that basketball is a viable means for social mobility.

Again, the salience of race affects judgments about both in- and out-groups (Jones, 1998). As evidence of this claim, Stone, Perry, and Darley (1997) found that a sample of mostly White undergraduate college students held stereotypic beliefs about Black and White athletes and these beliefs influenced their judgments about athletic performance of basketball players. In their study, half of the participants were led to think that the target player on a radio broadcast of a college basketball game was Black and the other half were led to think that the target was a White athlete. These students judged the Black male target as more athletic and less intelligent, and the White male target as less athletic but possessing more basketball intelligence and hustle. Later, Stone et al. (1999) found that making salient negative racial stereotypes about Black and White athletes had an adverse influence on the athletic performance of both groups.

Explainable in PCRT, race-sport stereotypes can affect the aspirations of youth toward or away from various athletic pursuits at the expense of their academic success (Harrison et al., 2004; Harrison et al., 1999). On this point, Taylor (2000) asserted that schools are "saturated with images of Black athlete stereotypes, . . . Not only does the reinforcement of physical ability over intellectual capability diminish the potential of young Black men, but it also perpetuates the myth that the road to success is paved with sports contracts, not diplomas" (p. 75). In short, scholars argue that race-based stereotypic beliefs can have detrimental consequences (Hall, 2002; Harrison et al., 2004; Harrison et al., 2002).

## **A Discussion on Race and Racism**

*Race* is a social construct used to categorize individuals usually based on visible biological features, although not supported by genetic indicators, such as skin color (e.g., dark skin versus white skin), facial features, and so on (Coakley, 2004; Loury, 2002). We start this discussion taking the position that race is much *less* a scientifically valid biological category, than a socially constructed invention (Mukhopadhyay & Henze, 2003).

In PCRT, *race* is both socially and psychologically constructed from accessible social information. Race, as a social construct, takes on defining properties that amplify group differences and contributes to perceptual

and behavioral biases. Such biases, in turn, create divergent experiences for individuals across racial groups. Divergent experiences lead to varying interpretations of what social justice is and, as a result, further amplifies the differences in social perception across the different racial groups (Jones, 2006). To reiterate, it is asserted that *race* is *spontaneously activated in cognition* from social information and affects the meaning of experiences (Jones, 1998). Further, people have a natural tendency, particularly in a race-conscious society, to *categorize* objects including other people using race markers (Loury, 2002).

From a PCRT perspective, *race* carries with it societal and psychological implications that can impose on individuals' beliefs about the behaviors of their own (*in-group*) and different (*out-group*) races. The racial categorization of people allows, if not contributes to stereotypic beliefs about different racial groups (Jones, 1998; Hewstone, Hantzi, & Johnston, 1991; Loury, 2002). For example, persistent explanations of Blacks' dominance in a few selected sports due to physical superiority (e.g., "better athletes but dim-witted") typify race logic (Coakley, 2004). Race logic suggests that White athletes' success in sports can be ascribed to intellectual attributes and hard work, whereas Black athletes' success is ascribed to natural superior physical abilities with inferior intelligence (Sailes, 1993). Stereotypic race logic in sports when conveyed to impressionable Black youth can impose beliefs of athletic superiority while minimizing beliefs of intellectual ability. In contrast, when race logic is conveyed to impressionable White youth it can impose beliefs of athletic inferiority while maximizing beliefs of intellectual superiority (Harrison et al., 2004; Harrison et al., 2002).

### A Discussion on Stereotyping

The study of stereotyping in the social sciences is commonly agreed to have begun with the 1922 publication of the book, *Public Opinion* by Walter Lippman. He defined stereotypes as *pictures in our heads* of people and events in the world. Lippman stated that individuals develop stereotypic images from a cultural perspective. Stereotyping is the process of accepting generalizations about groups of people often based on race markers (Harrison et al., 2002; Loury, 2002). Still today, the social construct of race contributes to the stereotypic imaging of Blacks. Blacks are often stereotyped as possessing natural physical prowess that gives them advantages to excel in sport activities that require high levels of athleticism such as basketball, boxing, football, and explosive-type track events (Entine, 2000). Paradoxically, Black athletes' under representation in most all other sports is marginalized as a consequence of the construction of "their race" with such stereotypic notions as "Blacks don't swim or ski, or race cars." Race for Black athletes is both less and more than it seems (Jones, 1998).

To reiterate, stereotypical views may operate without conscious activa-

tion (Jones, 1998). Devine (1989) suggested that stereotypic beliefs are encoded subconsciously in memory and retrieved automatically. Moreover, an individual's automatic processing of stereotypes has negative implications (Devine, 1989). For example, when teachers, coaches, and other sport professionals knowingly or unknowingly perpetuate stereotypic beliefs about athletic superiority and intellectual inferiority as a function of race, they do harm to the minds of impressionable youth in their charge. In educational contexts, this may result in academic disassociation, particularly for Black males. Research indicates that a large proportion of students of color (e.g., Blacks) underachieve academically as a result of the influence of negative intellectual stereotypes that are directed toward and perceived cognitively by those groups (Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Steele (1992, 1997) asserts that when a person encounters a situation that represents a domain with which she or he is identified, a *stereotype threat* exists of performing poorly and possibly harming her or his self-esteem. Scholars assert that negative stereotypes hinder performance by causing individuals within a stereotyped group to become apprehensive that their performance may serve to confirm the negative stereotype others have of their group (Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2000). This leads to the cyclical effects of self-stereotyping (Harrison et al., 2002). To the contrary, Moore, Madison-Colmore, and Smith (2003) and Mavis (1997) have found that negative stereotyping can also positively influence academic performance. They claim that negative stereotyping at times motivates students to "prove" the negative stereotype wrong. If the negative stereotype is that Black students do not perform well academically in school, then some students might work extra hard to perform well. Moreover, some Black collegiate athletes more strongly engage in the pursuit of academic achievement as a result of sports.

Blacks are both stereotyped by some members of other ethnic groups, as well as some engage in self-stereotyping. In PCRT, race-based stereotyping is pervasive and embedded in our minds toward others and turned inward on self as well. Self-stereotyping is selective in nature and often reinforces and defends the individual's and groups' self-esteem (Biernat, Vescio, & Green, 1996; Harrison et al., 2002). Self-stereotyping solidifies as the norm of a group is viewed as acceptable. In turn, this allows the individual to experience increased or decreased self-esteem and motivation. Arguably, basketball is a means of in-group pride and collective racial identity for some Blacks (Appiah, 2000; Boyd, 1997; Ogden & Hilt, 2003). But the prevalent stereotyping of Blacks as more athletic but less intelligent than Whites can contribute to harmful self-stereotyping (Harrison et al., 2002). This occurs in the Black community where some Black youth internalize the stereotypic belief that they are superior athletes but less intelligent than Whites (Hall, 2002). Speaking of intelligence, Hall (2002) stated that "inaccurate depictions can impose upon the confidence of Black students and create a self-

fulfilling prophecy that all but dictates failure in the classroom" (p. 117). The body-mind dichotomy underlying the stereotype of Black athletic superiority—intellectual inferiority is reinforced as Black youth rarely encounter Black intellects. More often they are exposed to role models in sports and entertainment careers (Taylor, 2000).

## Social, Cultural, and Psychological [Stereotypic] Influences

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Our assertion is that the pervasiveness of racial ideologies in sport contributes to a continuance of stereotypic beliefs on race and athleticism. Positioned as critical race theorists, we argue that a few selected sports have a dominant representation of Black athletes who participate or aspire to participate due to social, cultural, psychological, and economical variables (Burden, Hodge, & Harrison, 2004). In PCRT, inequalities result in divergent racial experiences. For example, America's history of racial disparities often result in the exclusion of Blacks from more costly and less accessible sports (e.g., golf, swimming, tennis). Conversely, Blacks have strongly identified with less costly and more accessible sports (e.g., basketball, boxing, football, track and field; Boyd, 1997; Burden et al., 2004; Ogden & Hilt, 2003; Phillip, 1998; Harrison et al., 2002). Though participation in organized football is rather expensive, whenever youth informally come together in their communities to play 'sand-lot' flag or tag football it is inexpensive.

More so than White athletes, Blacks aspire to professional careers in basketball, boxing, and football as a means to economical and social mobility (Ogden & Hilt, 2003; Rudman, 1986). This emphasis on 'making it' in sports tends to reinforce race-based stereotypic beliefs about Blacks' athletic superiority. Burden et al. (2004) analyzed Black and White college students' beliefs about their own racial group's (*in-group*) sport preferences and their beliefs about the other racial group's (*out-group*) sport preferences. They found differences between students' beliefs on *in-* and *out-groups'* preferences across three major themes: (a) socioeconomic inequalities, (b) social-cultural factors, and (c) stereotypical beliefs about athletic abilities. These and previous findings (Eitle & Eitle, 2000; Goldsmith, 2003; Ogden & Hilt, 2003; Sailes, 1993) reveal the persistent, often divergent, influences of race, culture, and stereotypic beliefs shaped in a society where racism is prevalent.

## Commentary on Socioeconomic Inequalities

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Burden et al. (2004) reported that both Black and White students discussed socioeconomic inequalities (e.g., issues of access to facilities and resources) as influencing their beliefs about *in-* and *out-groups'* preferences to partici-

pate in various sport activities. Overall, students from both groups believed that basketball and (flag) football were accessible in Black residential areas. But they believed that golf, swimming, and tennis were marginalized and much less accessible in most Black communities and urban schools.

Likewise, Eitle and Eitle (2000) found that economic variables were strong predictors of participation patterns of Black and White youth. They reported that Black high school students were 1.6 times more likely to participate in football and 2.5 times more likely to engage in basketball than their White peers. In contrast, Whites were found to be 1.3 times more likely to participate in baseball, league soccer, and swimming than their Black peers. These differences in participation patterns were considered a function of economic variables, whereupon Blacks were disadvantaged.

In PCRT, the notion of fairness in sports has not kept pace with the tangible measures of progress in US society, especially for those who are disadvantaged and marginalized. This is to say that economic status is related to opportunities within social and institutional structures (e.g., members-only clubs) of leisure and sport (Kelly, 1996) and Black people have consistently faced marginalized status.

Divergent experiences between Black and White youth in education and sports are influenced by structural inequalities in school and neighborhood resources. Black students comprise an ever increasing proportion of urban public schools, which most often are schools with high levels of low-income families. Often these youth attend schools (a) typified with insufficient budgets; (b) resulting in inadequate equipment and facilities (Kantor & Brenzel, 1992; Noguera, 2003); (c) where there exists limited access and opportunity to participate in a variety of sport activities (Edwards, 1998); and (d) where students are often exposed to inadequate and marginalized physical education programs (Ward & O'Sullivan, 2006). In contrast, White students are more likely to attend schools in suburban and rural areas and less likely to attend schools in high-poverty communities (Borman et al., 2004; Livingston & Wirt, 2004). In short, most schools today are culturally, ethnically, economically, and racially segregated, and unequal (Toppo, 2004). For Black students and athletes, their often inequitable educational and sport experiences, compared to their White peers, typifies the prevalence and magnitude of racism in the US (Benson, 2000).

In sports, divergent experiences are encountered as Whites more often have advantages in swimming, baseball, and league soccer participation compared to Black youth due to higher socioeconomic status and access to sport facilities in their communities (Goldsmith, 2003). These and other factors can adversely affect youths' sport opportunities. Such adversities lead some Black youth toward participation in more economically accessible sport activities such as basketball and football and away from less economically accessible sport activities such as golf and tennis (Eitle & Eitle, 2002).

### **Commentary on Cultural Factors**

According to Edwards (2000), an on-going triple tragedy functions in many Black communities. This threefold tragedy includes: (a) youths' obsessive pursuit of sports, (b) personal and cultural immaturity of many sport aspirants, and (c) cultural and institutional underachievement of their communities. These factors are cyclical and often drive Black youth toward a near-minded focus on selected sports (e.g., basketball) and away from other occupational and educational pursuits (Edwards, 2000; Taylor, 2000).

In their study, Burden et al. (2004) found that nearly half of the Black students studied believed socio-cultural variables (e.g., cultural norms, group identity, media coverage) influenced their ethnic groups' sport preferences (i.e., basketball and football). Conversely, most of the White students believed their ethnic groups' preferences to engage in golf, tennis, and swimming were functions of social and cultural traditions and influences. Overall students from both groups held beliefs that were influenced by socio-cultural variables and reinforced by the under- or over-representation of sport role models in tennis, golf, and swimming versus basketball and football, as examples.

Research shows that Black youth leisure and sport activity preferences differ from those of their White peers (Harrison et al., 1999; Phillip, 1998). Black youth more often identify with basketball, football, and track than their White peers (Harrison et al., 1999). In fact, Phillip (1998) found that basketball was the highest peer-approved sport activity for Blacks. Scholars have suggested that basketball is a means of in-group pride and collective identity for some Blacks (Appiah, 2000; Boyd, 1997). Further, basketball is often viewed as a means for economical and social mobility (Ogden & Hilt, 2003; Rudman, 1986). This view is continually reinforced as Black men make up some 80% of the players in the NBA (Lapchick & Matthews, 2001).

From a PCRT perspective (*tenet 5*), we submit that socio-cultural norms influence racial identity and in-turn play a key role in the common participation of many Black males in basketball. Jones (1998) describes racial identity as a source of in-group pride. In this logic, some Black males' acceptance of stereotypic beliefs and in-group pride situated in the cultural normalcy of basketball participation is manifested in years of practice and helps explain their high representation in collegiate and professional basketball (Boyd, 1997).

### **Commentary on Stereotypic Beliefs about Athleticism**

Still today, some individuals possess a well-learned, pervasive belief in race-based stereotypes (Burden et al., 2004; Harrison et al., 2004; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004). In accord with PCRT, Burden et al. (2004) found evidence of prevalent race-based stereotypic beliefs. They reported that 33% of the students they interviewed held stereotypic beliefs on athletic abilities (e.g.,

Blacks are *naturally* better athletes) for *in-* and *out* groups' preferences to participate in a variety of sport activities. Specifically, they reported that 35% of the Black students believed their own ethnic group had preferences to engage in sports that required perceived *superior natural ability* such as basketball, football, and track. However, 20% of the White students believed their own ethnic groups' preferences to engage in sports such as golf and tennis was a function of their perceived *natural ability* to excel in those activities. Also, 33% of the Black students believed that their out-group (i.e., Whites) engage in golf, tennis, and swimming because of their perceived natural ability to excel in those activities. Further, 43% of the White students believed Blacks prefer to participate in basketball and football because of perceived *natural athletic ability* to excel in those sports.

Overall, students from both ethnic groups believed Blacks prefer to participate in basketball and football and that, Blacks were *naturally* better athletes. In contrast, students from both ethnic groups believed Whites prefer to participate in golf and swimming while Whites had greater access to and *naturally* excelled in these sport activities (Burden et al., 2004). Burden et al. findings clearly show that both groups studied had accepted stereotypic notions that Blacks were innately superior athletes, whereas White athletes excelled in different sports due to greater work ethic and character. To counter such beliefs, Wiggins (1989) argues the "weight of the evidence indicates that the differences between participation patterns of black and white athletes is primarily due to differences in the history of experiences that individuals and their particular racial group have undergone" (p. 184).

## **Black Males: Athletics and Academics**

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Arguably, due to a desire to create winning teams and increase revenue as opposed to moral or altruistic motivates (Hodge et al., 2008), resistance to the integration of athletic teams began to lessen around the late 1960s and early 1970s (Reese, 1998). Critical race scholars assert that "Whites will tolerate or encourage racial advances for people of color only when they also promote White self-interest" (Singer, 2005, p. 468). For example, after encountering significant defeats largely due to the performances of Black athletes, legendary coaches such as the University of Alabama's Coach Paul "Bear" Bryant and University of Kentucky's Adolph Rupp grudgingly recruited Black athletes to their respective football and basketball teams in the early 1970s (Ladson-Billings, 2004). Arguably, owing to vestiges of racism, Coach Bryant's and Rupp's all White teams at that time typified other White coaches' hesitancy but eventual willingness to diversify their teams, particularly in the South and has been called the "Bear Bryant/Adolph Rupp epiphany" (Ladson-Billings, 2004).

Over the next 40 years, the number of Black male student-athletes increased tremendously at PW-IHE as these institutions actively recruited Black student-athletes primarily for the purpose of fielding the best teams. Speaking of collegiate sports, Feinstein (2000) stated that "in the big-time leagues, winning is just about all that matters" (p. 24). For the sake of winning, he suggests that such PW-IHE routinely accept student-athletes, basketball players in particular, whose academic numbers fall well below other students (Feinstein, 2000). The recruiting process and culture of an athletic program impresses upon the mindset of student-athletes the degree of seriousness given to academics. For example, when potential student-athletes go on recruitment visits to PW-IHE, an emphasis on the importance of academic achievement is rarely mentioned, if at all, but rather the successes of the sports programs are given priority (Benson, 2000).

This continues today with zealous efforts by collegiate sport teams at recruiting the "best athletes" while giving much less regard to the academic preparedness of the student-athlete (Benson, 2000; Eitzen & Purdy, 1993). Kiger and Lorentzen (1986) reported that *minority* athletes, "[B]lack male revenue sport players" in particular, tend to enter PW-IHE less well-prepared academically compared to White student-athletes and the academic disparities of these student-athletes continue throughout their time at the college or university. Kiger and Lorentzen concluded that to the extent that minority athletes receive a higher proportion of athletic scholarships compared to White student-athletes, they would argue that sport participation allows some minority student-athletes who are less well-prepared academically to enroll at the university, when these students might not otherwise have been admitted.

Liken to this Lucas and Lovaglia (2002) reported that over 20% of football and basketball student-athletes were accepted under special admittance programs. To be sure, some Black student-athletes are motivated to achieve academically and go beyond merely performing well enough to maintain compliance with eligibility requirements for sports participation (Benson, 2000). But too often, student-athletes do "just enough to get by" while investing too heavily into sports at the neglect of their education (Benson, 2000). In PCRT, acting as if race doesn't matter, when in fact it does, places one susceptible to missed opportunities and acceptance of a notion whose very enunciation puts one in a 'one-down' position (Jones, 1998). Black student-athletes, who enter PW-IHE unprepared academically, are susceptible to missed opportunities as they start their college experiences at a one-down position and often do not recover to achieve academically or graduate (Anderson & South, 2000).

Paradoxical to the highly publicized successes of some Black student-athletes on the playing field (Whiteside, 2006), consistently, graduation data from the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) show Black male

student-athletes are less likely to graduate from college than their White peers and they typically perform less well academically during their enrollment (Anderson & South, 2000; NCAA, 2004). Some scholars have suggested that this consistent disparity in graduation rates of Black and White student-athletes is attributable to Black males lack of academic preparation for college (Eitzen & Purdy, 1993) and to the enrollment of Black student-athletes in courses that serve only to help maintain their athletic eligibility (Byers, 1995; Singer, 2005). For Black male student-athletes, failure to become acclimated with the academic demands at their respective institutions may have detrimental consequences (Donnor, 2005). For too many Black males low expectations and limited academic opportunities available during high school put them at a disadvantage in college (Benson, 2000; Byers, 1995; Donnor, 2005; Eitzen & Purdy, 1993).

Again it has been argued that some Black student-athletes' place much emphasis on sport pursuits with less attention given to academics (Benson, 2000). More critical than debates on too much or too little emphasis on athletic versus academic pursuits is a need to recognize the powerful and lasting influence that America's legacy of racism and present day educational inequalities continue to exert on the psyche and academic achievement of Black males. This assertion raises questions such as: What is academic achievement? What is an achievement gap between racial groups? These kinds of questions have been approached in different ways.

Usually, academic achievement is described in terms of standardized test scores, grade point averages (GPA), and graduation rates. Common also is a comparison between ethnic or racial groups on such measures, which then leads to dialogue and debates on the *achievement gap*. The term achievement gap refers to "the disparities in standardized test scores between Black and White, Latina/o and White, and recent immigrant and White students" (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 3). Typifying the common discourse, Benson (2000) stated that as a group, Black male student-athletes were "the least prepared for college (lowest high school GPA and ACT/SAT scores), had the lowest GPAs in college, the highest tendency to 'cluster' in easy courses in easy majors, and were least likely to graduate compared to all student-athletes" (p. 224). Increasingly educational researchers have questioned the value of standardized testing in predicting academic potential or indicating achievement, particularly with marginalized groups (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Ladson-Billings (2006, 2008) suggests that a focus on the achievement gap is misplaced and she goes on to reframe the discourse to a focus on an "education debt." She explained that:

Instead of an achievement gap, I believe we have an education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The debt language totally changes the relationship between students and their schooling. For instance, when we think of what we are combating as an achievement gap, we implicitly place the onus for

closing the gap on the students, their families, and their individual teachers and schools. But the notion of education debt requires us to think about how all of us, as members of a democratic society, are implicated in creating these achievement disparities. (Ladson-Billings, 2008, p. 236).

The notion of an education debt more profoundly speaks to educational inequities affecting Black students than a focus on achievement gaps ever could (Ladson-Billings, 2006, 2008).

Educational inequities and disenfranchisement are particularly troubling to the plight of Black males as many of them underachieve academically and leave high school (Holzman, 2004) or college (Anderson & South, 2000) without graduating. In 2001-2002, for example, nearly 60% of Black males nationally did not receive high school diplomas with their peers (Holzman, 2004). Some Black students feel that they must suppress their racial identity in order to achieve academically (Fordham, 1988). Further, Black students at times perceived that their efforts to excel academically would result in them being stereotyped as *sell-outs*, or as *acting White* and in conflict with their own cultural identities (Fryer & Torelli, 2005). The phenomenon of *acting White*, according to Fryer and Torelli (2005, p. 3), "describes a set of social interactions in which Black adolescents ridicule other black adolescents for investing in behaviors characteristic of whites (having an interest in ballet, raising their hand in class, or making good grades, e.g.)." In PCRT, knowledge of stereotypes can and do influence beliefs, judgments, and behaviors. Pressured by peers, some Black youth may suppress their academic talents to avoid being called "acting White" (Fryer & Torelli, 2005). Acting White is a labeling which perpetuates the stereotypic belief that Whites are naturally more intelligent than Blacks (Hall, 2002).

## Implications and Future Challenges

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Schools, institutions of higher education, and sport arenas in the US are well accepted as places to receive and exchange social knowledge. In such places, teachers, coaches, and others often unknowingly (or knowingly) make salient values and beliefs shaped by racial stereotypes that give student-athletes distorted perceptions about their own and others' athletic and academic abilities (Burden et al., 2004; Harrison et al., 2004). In PCRT, race becomes more than with it is with the stereotypic belief that Blacks dominate sports, partly due to their presence and recent successes in basketball and football (Edwards, 2000). It is less salient cognitively for the dominant group, White athletes, who actually do dominate most sports in America (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004). Steele and colleagues have found that the salience of racial stereotypes can adversely affect an individual's academic and athletic performances (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Stone et al., 1999).

Sport sociologists claim that due to prevalent race-sport stereotypes White students are often *steered away from* certain sports but instead encouraged to spend their energies on academic pursuits. In contrast, Black students are often *steered toward* athletic pursuits and given little, if any, encouragement for pursuing academics (Harrison et al., 2004; Harrison et al., 1999). Of concern, Steele (1992) suggested that Black males may *dis-identify* with academic challenge as an avoidance behavior due to perceived intellectual inferiority. To counter such stereotypic beliefs and help Black student-athletes succeed academically several challenges must be confronted.

First, academic faculty, coaches, and others (e.g., academic advisors) must engage in thoughtful self-reflective examination of their own race-sport stereotypic beliefs. This is necessary to better understand in what ways their beliefs have been influenced by the social construct of race and what affect that has on their interactions with Black student-athletes. PCRT asserts that no one is exempt from the spontaneous and persistent influences of racism in America, thus self-reflection becomes a critical exercise for interacting with a diversity of student-athletes. Moreover, it is important to utilize culturally relevant coaching practices (Martens, 2004). Increasingly, coaches have been given financial incentives tied to student-athletes' academic successes. Colleges and universities "now commonly write rewards for team academic achievement into their coaches' contracts, ostensibly keeping the coaches and their sports connected to their higher-education setting" (Wieberg, 2006a, p. 18C). Wieberg (2006a) quoted NCAA President Myles Brand to say "Certainly, win-loss records are important and should be (rewarded), ... But we should have greater incentives for academic performance [for both coaches and student-athletes]" (Wieberg, 2006a, p. 18C). For coaches, winning takes priority, and arguably it should; but, rewarding coaches and student-athletes for academic successes is a step in the right direction.

Second, coaches and academic advisors must do more than merely monitor study tables and assign student-athletes to academic majors and courses deemed unchallenging with the primary intent to help student-athletes maintain academic eligibility to participate in sports (Benson, 2000). They must ensure that student-athletes are exposed to learning experiences that focus on issues in sports and education as those articulated in this paper by sport sociologists, educators, and historians (e.g., Coakley, 2004; Harrison & Belcher, 2006; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Harrison, 1995, 2001; Harrison et al., 2004; Harrison et al., 2002; Harrison et al., 1999; Miller, 1998; Wiggins, 1989).

Third, to get at the issue of youth not properly balancing sport and academic pursuits, parents, coaches, and the educational community (e.g., academic faculty, advisors and support services) must do more to help eliminate racist stereotypic beliefs by finding culturally relevant ways to help Black students understand the difference between 'acting White' and success-

fully navigating the educational system (Hall, 2002; Martens, 2004; Spigner, 1993). A culture of high academic expectations must be created with proper guidance and support services to help Black student-athletes recognize their intellectual talents (Benson, 2000; Hall, 2002; Spigner, 1993). In creating such a culture it is necessary to give particular attention to the intersection of racialized groups and contextual variables (e.g., Black student-athlete from the inner city ghetto).

Fourth, it is also important to highlight the academic successes of Black student-athletes as enthusiastically as is often done for athletic triumphs more publicly displayed in coliseums and stadiums. Black student-athletes must come to know that accomplishments outside of sports are valued and respected. Related to this, more should be done to highlight both positive athletic and non-athletic Black role models. Highlighting a diversity of successful role models beyond recognizable music and film entertainers and high profile sport figures will do much to help increase an awareness of the importance of properly balancing sport and academic pursuits. Not doing so only reinforces the stereotypes that need to be dispelled. On the other hand, to the extent that the academic successes of Black student-athletes are celebrated, their confidence in the academic arena will be enhanced (Garibaldi, 1992).

These challenges call for emphasizing a balancing of sport and academic goals. Black youth must be made aware of the pitfalls of a single-minded focus on sport careers (Price, 1997). This is necessary to help prevent more Black males from experiencing dreams deferred or denied due to poor decision-making (Cadwallader & Fuddy, 2006; Moran, 2005; Oller, 2006). Our core message to Black student-athletes is that dreams of sport careers must not come at the exclusion of potentially more attainable educational goals. The message is clear, Black student-athletes must be encouraged and supported in the academic arena, held accountable for their efforts both in and out classes, and they must not buy into stereotypic notions about their athletic or academic capabilities, but rather take responsibility for their academic life as seriously as they often do at excelling as athletes.

## **Closing Commentary**

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It is our position, from a critical race perspective, that a legacy of racial disparities and discriminatory policies and practices in the US and a combination of social, economical, cultural, educational, and psychological factors influence Black student-athletes. These factors have a spontaneous and persistent influence of race, racial identity, and beliefs that contribute to far too many Black student-athletes' emphasis on sport pursuits with less attention given to academic promise and achievement. This legacy of racial inequalities in

the US continues to perpetuate race-sport stereotypic beliefs about different racialized groups (Burden et al., 2004; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004; Harrison et al., 2004).

Our ultimate challenge is to lead the next generation of youth into a new era void of stereotypic beliefs about self and others. For instance, debunking stereotypic myths, two intelligent Black quarterbacks, Ohio State's Troy Smith and the University of Florida's Chris Leak led their respective football teams into the BCS national championship game on January 8, 2007 in Glendale, Arizona (Carey, 2006). Off the field, both Smith and Leak excelled academically and graduated from their respective universities. Their achievements bring forth aspirations of a sport culture free from racial conventions, specifically at a position that has been pigeonholed by race for generations. This socially progressive outlook brings enormous responsibility that will require informed, determined, and long termed effort. This must start and end with each of us individually, yet requires all of us collectively to promote the progress of Black student-athletes both academically and athletically.

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