African American Racial Identity: Theory and Application to Education, Race and Sport in America

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African American Racial Identity and Sport

The topic of race is often ignored, glossed over, or diluted with other concepts such as multicultural issues or diversity. We know that racial opinions, feelings, and beliefs operate in subtle but powerful ways even when there is no explicit intention. Unfortunately, racial discourse is curiously absent or under-discussed in the academic arena (Apple, 1999). In the academic domain where the quest for knowledge is at the center of our mission, the discourse on race is conspicuously absent. This topic is long overdue for frank, constructive, and productive discussion (Carter & Goodwin, 1994).

The study of race as a biological or genetic variable, especially with regard to sport, has a historically inauspicious and questionable reputation (Wiggins, 1997). Genetically-speaking, the boundary lines drawn between races have been profoundly blurred. In this country there are some classified as African American that have more features common to Europeans than Africans. The study of the genetic and biological basis for race has been deemed fruitless and is composed of "loose and leaky" categories that defy logic and are inherently inconsistent (Dole, 1995). According to LaVeist (1996), race is a social, rather than biological factor that reveals a common sociopolitical history. Being African American has more to do with shared experiences than shared genetic material. Recent works like Darwin's Athletes by Hoberman (1997), and Taboo by Entine (2000) reinforce biological determinism and cloud the empirical realities of how racism manipulates patterns of identity, sport and social distinction.

Even though many recognize the complexity and meaning of assigning individuals to racial categories, it is still the most widely used method of classification. Hewstone, Hantzi and Johnston (1991) attest to the prevalence of race as a prominent organizing principle in memory categorization. Our inclination to categorize people in terms of race is influenced by our social surroundings, culture, customs, beliefs, and political associations, which in turn guides our conceptions of ourselves as well as others (Haslam, Oakes, Reynolds & Turner, 1999). Racial ideology has been entrenched in hundreds of years of history and has a firm hold on the social and psychological composition of this country. Racial classification may apply either externally, inter-

nally, or both, but once established, it is extremely resistant to change (Harris, 1997).

Being African American presupposes a myriad of connotations in the minds of both African Americans and non-African Americans alike. Consider all the adjectives that come to mind when this racial designation is considered. Whenever engaging in this psychological exercise with others, the terms "athlete" or "sport" often surface. While these general terms are employed, most acknowledge the allusion to a specific and narrow range of sports which tend to have an overrepresentation of African American participants (e.g. basketball, football, track and field). The implication is that, in most cases, being African American denotes an identification, either directly or indirectly, with specific sport activities. Consequently, in many cases development of African American identity may be tied to the development of an identification with sport.

The objective of this paper is to examine research and theoretical perspectives on African American racial identity development and investigate parallels in the development of sport competency and participation patterns. Knowledge in this realm may cultivate a better understanding of the sport, physical activity performance, and participation patterns in the African American population.

African American Racial Identity Development

The development of identity is a socialization process shaped by experiences with one's family, community, school, group and social affiliations. It undergoes trials and tests to serve to make the owner feel focused and stable by making life predictable (Cross, 1995). While change in the environment is tolerated and sometimes welcomed, a change in our identity can be disturbing and difficult.

Cross (1995) outlines the metamorphic process whereby African Americans "become Black." This developmental process in which African Americans develop a manner of thinking about and evaluating themselves in terms of being "Black" is called nigrescence (Cross, 1995; Helms, 1985). Cross (1995) depicts nigrescence as a resocializing experience that steers one's preexisting racial identity from Eurocentric to Afrocentric. This comprehensive model of African American racial identity development provides a rational and logical structure which supports the understanding of the relationship of racial identity development and sport. Additionally, Cross, Parham and Helms (1991) cite the broad applicability of this model by alluding to the fact that several authors in different parts of the country were developing parallel models independently indicating that African American identity development was essentially the same across several regions of the United States. In fact, this model has even been applied with slight modifications to the people of South Africa (Hocoy, 1999).

Cross's (1995) revision of his original racial identity model includes refinements that better coincide with today's social forces. The original four-stage process was modified through review of research findings on racial identity development. It is important to note that nigrescence is not a process that follows normal physical growth and development. It is a mechanism by which African Americans who are assimilated, deculturalized, and in many cases miseducated develop into a more Afrocentric person. The following are brief summaries of Cross's revised nigrescence model (Cross, 1995).

Stage 1: Pre-encounter. The African American in the pre-encounter stage exhibits a racial attitude that ranges from race neutral to anti-Black. These individuals may not deny being physically of African American descent, but consider it to be insignificant in their life or in some cases, a negative trait. In this stage some see race as a problem or stigma. In extreme cases, some may espouse potent anti-Black attitudes and attribute negative stereotypes and attitudes that approach those of White racists. Those in this stage will rarely exhibit any pride in their race and tend to blame African Americans for their own racial problems. They are often miseducated and see no value in "Black Studies" and often exaggerate and romanticize the talents and capacities of Whites while showing skepticism and apprehension about the abilities of African Americans in the same position. In this stage the individual is socialized to favor a Eurocentric cultural perspective.

Stage 2: Encounter. This stage is usually identified by a series of incidents, episodes, or circumstances that erode or transform the individual's present outlook or worldview. The individual must personalize the encountered information in a way that changes the way the person sees the world and themselves. The encounter nudges the individual outside his or her comfort zone and may cause them to be perplexed, apprehensive, or even depressed. The person may seek additional information and validation for their newly developing identity. This state may be accompanied by emotion, guilt, and anger that are generalized toward Whites. Even though significant changes are taking place in the individual's identity, there may be little outward manifestation.

Stage 3: Immersion-Emersion. The immersion-emersion stage of nigrescence is characterized by destruction of the previous identity while simultaneously constructing the new Afrocentric identity. There is a commitment to replace the old worldview with a new one, but the new self is not clearly defined. Therefore symbols and attitudes thought to represent the new self attract individuals in this stage. Symbols such as styles of dress, hairstyles, and involvement in particular organizations and political groups typify individuals in this stage. Individuals in the immersion-emersion stage adopt a dichotomized worldview where everything is simply Black or White. After immersing themselves into an almost totally Afrocentric attitude and

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posture, the individual emerges from this oversimplified ideological perspective to a more reflective and profound understanding of Black issues. The individual understands and views the immersion as a period of transformation and moves on to a deeper understanding of nigrescence.

Stage 4: Internalization. Internalization represents a sense of contentment with the self that calms the internal struggle of the previous stages (Proctor & Harrison, 1999). The militant and radical attitudes are transformed into thoughtful examination of oppression and racism. The individual is saturated with sincere connection to and love and acceptance of African American communities. Internalization accompanies a soothing of internal psychological stress and the reconstruction of one's basic personality along with the intermeshing of one's Blackness with other role identities (e.g. spiritual, occupational).

Stage 5: Internalization-Commitment. The nigrescence voyage ends for some with curtailment of activities or discontinuation of active involvement in African American activities. Others dedicate a substantial degree of time and effort forging their new worldview into tangible efforts to further the cause of Blackness. Nigrescence theory suggests that this commitment is the only partition between the previous stage and this one.

The activation and consummation of the nigrescence experience is not the same for all African Americans. In some highly unlikely situations the individual may never develop past the pre-encounter stage while others progress through all stages before reaching adulthood. Speight and Thomas (1999) indicate that African American parents' racial identity attitudes were related to racial socialization attitudes. That is, parents with pre-encounter, encounter, and immersion attitudes did not have strong racial socialization attitudes. African American parents with internalization attitudes had strong racial socialization attitudes and were more likely to socialize their children to have positive racial identity. The vast majority of the participants in this study, African American parents, overwhelmingly felt that racial socialization was important and necessary to prepare children for the reality of racism. Plummer (1995) indicates that African American adolescents from nurturing environments display primarily internalization attitudes. Plummer reiterates that African American adolescents in her study were prepared by their parents with the skills necessary to function in a predominately European American environment. Plummer also cautions that because their views of society are so narrow and devoid of life experiences, their internalization attitudes may be premature and idealized rather than based on experience and thoughtful analysis. It is doubtful that today's African American adolescent begins nigrescence development at the pre-encounter stage.

The Role of Stereotypes in Identity Development

Stereotypes are defined as beliefs about the personal characteristics of a group. These beliefs are often overgeneralized, erroneous, and resistant to change (Meyer, 1993). Nevertheless, stereotypes significantly influence the way we view other groups as well as our own behavior. Stereotypes function to organize and simplify perceived information, preserve important social values, maintain group beliefs, justify collective actions and sustain positive group distinctiveness (Oakes, Haslam & Turner, 1994). Stereotyping or social categorization that operates in the self-concept precipitates self-stereotyping which changes individuals into psychological group members (Oakes, Haslam & Turner, 1994).

The process of self-stereotyping and producing psychological groups is meshed in the development of social identity. Social identity deals with the inclination to maintain an optimistic view of the self through identifying with or establishing favorable comparisons between one's own group and other groups (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990). This social identity derives from the knowledge of group membership and development of collective self-esteem. In African American culture, the overwhelming success of African American athletes in particular sports would conceivably prompt the development of elevated collective self-esteem and perpetuate positive self-stereotypes in the realm of sport. Biernat, Vescio and Green (1996) suggest that the process of self-stereotyping is selective. They argue that those operating within the stereotyped group and that have immersed themselves in the group identity display protective behavior with regard to their collective self-esteem. Goodstein and Ponterotto (1997) indicate that racial identity and self-esteem are significantly correlated for African Americans, but not for European Americans. In a society where being African American evokes so many negative stereotypes, it is easy to fathom why there would be fervent identification with a positive stereotype. The superior African American athlete stereotype has a unique history (Wiggins, 1997) and is pervasive among the general population. Stone, Perry and Darley (1997) gave evidence of the ubiquitous perception of African American sport superiority in the general population. Given the same information and listening to a radio broadcast of a basketball game, participants rated perceived African American athletes as having more athletic ability while perceived European American athletes were rated as having more basketball intelligence and hustle. There is also empirical evidence that suggests that the presence and salience of racial stereotypes can actually influence intellectual performance (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995) and athletic performance (Stone, Lynch, Sjomeling & Darley, 1999). In light of the fact that stereotypes and self-stereotypes form the basis of group identity, or in this case African American racial identity, it is tenable to say that developing skills in a particular sport may be intrinsic in the development of African American racial identity.

Racial Identity in Adolescence

Awareness of racial differences are apparent to children as young as preschoolers (Ramsey, 1987). According to Ramsey, children, regardless of race, use race to categorize people more often than any other trait. Spencer and Markstrom-Adams (1990) indicate that in studies of preschool and elementary school-aged children there is an inclination towards a pro-White bias in racial preference, attitudes, and identification. However, one's identity becomes crucial in adolescence. Adolescence is a time when one fervently seeks an identity. For African American children it is a time when the individual defines themselves as African American as part of the developmental process (Plummer, 1995). During this time the adolescent confirms preferences and beliefs consistent with his/her group affiliations.

African American adolescents tend to be more committed to a racial identity than European Americans (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). The meaning and significance of being African American becomes salient to the African American adolescent in many areas of life. For an African American adolescent it is virtually impossible to be unaware of the implications your racial designation imposes on your life. Hatcher and Troyna (1993) contend that racism is a profound factor in the educational experiences of African American and European American children.

Goodstein and Ponterotto (1997) indicate that unlike European Americans, for African Americans, an elevated degree of racial identity indicates increased self-esteem. In a society in which both blatant and subliminal messages communicate negative images of African Americans, African American adolescents can find positive images in few domains. One of the few areas where African Americans are depicted positively is sport. African American athletes are highly visible and occupy a lofty status in the eyes of American society, while in the mainstream of American society, African Americans are rendered virtually invisible. In an attempt to cope with the alienation and frustration, some African American athletes channel their creative energies into the creation of distinctive and demonstrative sport skills, styles of demeanor, language, gestures, gait patterns, and the like (Majors, 1990). When African American adolescents who are in search for identity observe these behaviors, and those observed are rewarded and admired for their actions, the behaviors are easily incorporated into the individual's identity. Many of these young people are heavily exposed to the prevalent stereotypes about African Americans, particularly in the realm of sport. In an effort to form a positive racial identity it is plausible to think they would adhere to and identify with what they perceive as positive stereotypical views of African Americans of which the most prominent is the African American athlete.

During adolescence young people are exposed to ideas and values outside of those taught and established in the family. They move from a strong family-influenced

setting to a peer-dominated domain. Parents and other significant authority figures gradually lose their persuasive power while the need for peer approval escalates (Payne & Isaacs, 1999, pg. 51-52). For males, especially African American males, involvement in sport and athletic ability are powerful determinants of social acceptability and group membership. According to Payne and Isaacs, sport and physical activity involvement not only determine group membership, but skills are molded and pressure is exerted to improve skills in the accepted activities to gain respect and approval. All this occurs at a time when young people are growing rapidly in size and strength and the requisite parameters for exceptional performance are developing rapidly. These young people are not only developing an identity with their peer group, they are identifying with the sports and physical activities in which they are participating.

For most youth this means identifying with and participating in activities that are popular with the peer group whose identification is likely with high-status models with whom they can identify. For African American youth this means participation in sports in which they see other successful African Americans participate (e.g. basketball, football, track and field). Harrison (1999) demonstrated that African American adolescents' physical activity choices were significantly different from and less eclectic than those of European American adolescents. These students identified overwhelmingly with the stereotypical African American activities such as basketball, football, and track. According to Harrison these choices were rooted in the development of the adolescent's self-schema. It is likely that these schemata, because they coincide with racial identity development, intensely influence sport and physical activity choices throughout life.

Black Masculinity, Popular Culture and Sport: Limited Identities

Harrison's (1999) findings indicate that African American adolescents' physical activity choices were significantly different from and less eclectic than those of European American adolescents. What is pertinent to these findings is the transference of this schematic identity into broader societal occupational structures. In other words, if identities are narrow and monolithic for African American children (especially boys) inside the vacuum of sport – then how might these same perceptions affect their outside sport (hence reiterating a narrow sport choice).

There is some evidence that limited media exposure manipulates choices of identity for African American males. In other words, Johnson et al. (1995) found that when compared to the control group, subjects in the rap video exposure conditions were more likely to say that they wanted to be like the materialistic young man and were less confident that the other young man would achieve his educational goals (Johnson et al., 1995). Clearly, a link exists between sport and music as the attainable images of

entertainment to Black youth.

The inference from their study we want to point out lies in our purpose to address racial identity in sport; their purpose in investigating "Violent Attitudes and Deferred Academic Aspirations: Deleterious Effects of Exposure to Rap Music" was to assess the effect of exposure to rap music on perceptions of the utility of education and has evidence for our purposes: their findings indicate that exposure to violent rap music videos has an effect on the attitudes and perceptions of young African American males. While not specifically tested in their study, we argue that the bombardment of Black athletes in a few sports as mentioned earlier (football, basketball, track and field) alter and confound the perception of Black youth, and relate to the evidence found in the music investigation. Consider a discussion of their results in the context of our African American and European American subjects in the sport schema study:

> Although the nonviolent rap videos did not affect the perceptions of the use of violence, they did affect perceptions of education. The results indicated that when compared to controls, subjects in the video exposure conditions (violent and nonviolent) expressed a greater desire to be like the materialistic young man who did not go to college. Finally, the results indicated that when compared to the controls, subjects in the video exposure conditions felt that it was more likely that the young man would *not* complete law school (Johnson et al. , 1995, p. 37).

The perceptions by the Black male youth in the Johnson study indicate a negative feeling about an educational schema. This relates to Black male youth focusing on certain sports (football, basketball, track and field) and Whites on the others (hockey, diving, cycling). These phenomena might relate to the activation frequency hypothesis (Barg et al., 1996), which suggests that the more frequent a particular stimuli is activated, the more likely that stimuli is chronically accessible (Johnson et al., 1995). A broader question to consider is if Black male youth have negative perceptions outside of sport in terms of occupational aspirations. Further, how would occupational schemas vary by race? Preeminent scholar Cornel West in his essay on Black sexuality articulates that Black males have different forms of expression in terms of navigating oppression, racism and patriarchal power structures. In other words, African American males in overrepresented numbers channel (Edwards, 1973) their efforts towards the arts (sports and music), because this is one vessel and space "that offers Black men stylistic options (West, 1993). Others have suggested the context of expression, Black masculinity, and space is critical when examining Black men, either empirically or in an exploratory fashion (Andrews, 1998; Majors & Billison, 1992; Spraggins, 1999; White & Cones, 1999). The challenge in the 21ˢᵗ Century is not to exclude Black male confidence and expression by channeling them away from

sport; the challenge is how we can socialize this ethnic gender to invest in education with the same enthusiasm, work ethic and creative/artistic expression that they do on the playing fields and gyms (Harrison et al., 2000). More investigation is needed into the perceptions of young Black male youth and how the image of professional athletes and entertainers (that look like them: Black) accessing mainstream economic structures with non-status quo (suit and tie versus hip hop) attire and behaviors – correlate, influence and affect their daily investment in rigorous learning and scholarship for delayed gratification in occupational and vocational positions.

Blurring the Socioeconomic Status Lines

There are those that suggest that the differences observed in sport and physical activity participation patterns and performance can be attributed to differences in socioeconomic status (SES) (Wilson, 1978). It has been postulated that people of lower income have fewer options and opportunities for securing high status and lucrative employment. Professional sport provides one of the few ways this can be accomplished. Furthermore, it is speculated that sports like basketball are popular among poorer people because of the ease of accessibility to facilities. According to these theses, African Americans are overrepresented in particular sports because they are disproportionately represented in lower SES. While these theories appear logical they also distort, dilute, and oversimplify the meaning and impact of being African American.

Several researchers and theorists give evidence that the significance of being African American and the development of African American racial identity cross SES lines (Pettigrew, 1980; Willie, 1989). Durant and Sparrow (1997) found that regardless of their social class, African Americans in their study perceived that their opportunities were limited because of their race. Furthermore, the study revealed that African Americans in this study were more race conscious than class conscious and middle class African Americans were more race conscious than lower class African Americans. This indicates that regardless of social class, African Americans feel that race is still a profoundly important component in determining the opportunities and limitations on their lives.

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