Experiences of Black Athletes with White Fandom

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Race is understood to be an arbitrarily and socially constructed phenomena, regardless of its political and social effects (Omi & Winant, 1994). The nature of race in our society suggests racial injustice is a thing of the past; many whites feel that race is simply not a factor in how they live their everyday lives (Collins, 2005). This is untrue. Racism is systemic, racism is alive, and the sporting environment is not exempt from its pervasiveness. Inspired by the Agyemang study in 2010, this research investigated the ways in which a racially homogenous fan base impacts the black student-athlete experience, filling the gaps that currently exist in research related to the interplay between racism and fandom. The theoretical framework used in this study is called ‘habitus’ which explains the internalized dispositions, tastes, habits, rules, and perceptions by a collective of people. This research gave black athletes a platform to speak candidly about how their intercollegiate experience has been influenced by the disproportionate racial representation between player and fan.

The study answers the following research questions: 1) How do interactions with fans impact the overall student-athlete experience? 2) In what ways does race affect student-athlete/fan interactions? 3) What actions can the university take to lessen the likelihood of negative racial interactions between players and fans? The participants in this study identify as black, male and current (or recently former) basketball player at a Power 5 Division 1 predominantly white institution (PWI). Semi-structured interviews created a space where the athletes felt comfortable speaking about some of their more disheartening and disturbing experiences; athletes were also given the opportunity to provide suggestions for how the existing system can create a better environment for black student-athletes to thrive.

Intercollegiate athletics, as a space, often denies or minimizes the existence of racial tension. Many of the microaggressions displayed by white fan are overlooked or ignored because they have become a normalized part the process. When asked to speak about their fanbase, every participant first described donors using words like “white”, “old”, and “man. This is a perfect example of how the racial disproportionality between black player and white fan has been normalized to where athletes only envision one kind of fan. Another theme that resurfaced throughout the interviews was threat management, also known as fear mitigation. The black male, who was ordinarily considered aggressive and dangerous, became respected and supported once in uniform. The sense of support and belonging an athlete feels from fans in their playing environment should always be determined by their character and performance, never by the color of their skin. Suggestions for improvement include reevaluating the number of tickets athletes are allotted to get more of their family and friends in the stands. Whether it’s offering an annual symposium that focuses on bettering the experiences of black athletes while also preparing them for greater career or networking opportunities post-college athletics, something must be done and the time is now.