A Different World: A Critical Race Reconceptualization of HBCU Athletics

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Socio-Cultural - Diversity (College Sport)  Abstract 2021-285
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  Mode: Asynchronous
Session: Live Q&A for Socio-Cultural (Asynchronous)  Saturday June 5, 2021, 3:50 PM - 4:50 PM

Since their inception, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have continued their mission to provide safe and equitable opportunities for Black students. Due to the design and intention of HBCUs, all components reflect the same underlying mission and goals– including athletics. Historically, HBCU athletics and athletes have contributed to the social, cultural, economic, and political landscapes of their communities and the broader society. Although their contributions are noteworthy, HBCU athletics have not received the proper representation within college sport research and education. Using Singer’s (2005) challenge to dismantle epistemological racism in the framing, study, and understanding of sport - this study presents a reconceptualization of HBCU athletics using a Critical Race Theory (CRT) conceptual framework. To reconceptualize HBCU athletics it is integral to understand HBCU athletics not as an auxiliary organization, but a component of the sporting sphere that holds specific social, cultural, economic, and historical value (Cooper, 2013; Cooper, Cavil, & Cheeks, 2014; Cooper & Hawkins, 2016). HBCU athletics are social institutions, much like Frey and Eitzen’s (1991) explanation of sport in society. This study aims to shift the discourse and understanding of HBCU athletics from an organizational approach towards a broader societal perspective.

Cooper et. al (2014) is the foundation for this study through their connection between CRT and HBCU athletics. Their multilevel exploration into historic and contemporary challenges facing HBCU athletic programs provides much-needed insight into the broader realm of sport – specifically Black sporting environments. Cooper and colleagues' (2014) usage of CRT to explain the conditions that have shaped policy and practice impacting HBCU athletics (performance and administration) set the platform to use CRT to further redefine and explain HBCU athletics as a social institution. Using a combination of Stefancic and Delgado's (2017) and Hiraldo’s (2010) overviews of CRT, the core tenets applied are: the permanence of racism, the voice-of-color thesis, interest convergence, Whiteness as property, and the critique of liberalism. The permanence of racism is the entrenched nature of racism within college sport administration and culture (Davis, 1994; Nwadike et al, 2016) and the voice-of-color thesis illuminates the unique culture and operation of HBCU athletics through the voices of leaders, athletes, and students (Cooper & Hawkins, 2014; Hall, 2016). Whiteness as property is exhibited through White-dominant narratives regarding HBCUs and HBCU athletics and underrepresentation of HBCU athletics research within the field of sport management (Hawkins, 2010; Singer, 2005), the integration and current overrepresentation of Black college athletes at HWCUs holds clear connections to interest convergence (Hawkins, 2010), and the flawed race-neutral/color-blind approach to HBCU athletics calls for a critique of liberalism (Cheeks, 2016).

Given the presence and prominence sport in displays of social unrest regarding systemic inequality and oppression, the following outcomes of this study hold a transformative foundation: 1) reshape the discussion and understanding of HBCU athletics and 2) promote critical reconceptualizations of sporting environments grounded in the uplift of underrepresented identities, e.g. Hispanic Serving Institutions (LatCrit), Women’s colleges and sport leagues (Black Feminist Thought), Tribal Colleges/Universities (Native American Critical Theory), and ability-based sport organizations (Critical Disability Theory).