BLACK MALE COLLEGIATE FOOTBALL PLAYERS' EXPERIENCES OF RACIAL

MISTREATMENT AND ITS EFFECTS: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

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Dissertation Prepared for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

August 2022

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Walsh, J. Andy. *Black Male Collegiate Football Players' Experiences of Racial Mistreatment and Its Effects: A Qualitative Analysis*. Doctor of Philosophy (Counseling Psychology), August 2022, 87 pp., 2 tables, 3 appendices, references, 62 titles.

Research examining how these athletes, specifically football players, are racially mistreated in revenue sports in Power Five conferences, as well as the effect of this mistreatment on their health and well-being, has been sparse. Thus, the purpose of my study was to examine current Black male college football players' experiences of racial mistreatment within their lives in general, and their collegiate sport experiences in particular, and to learn how these experiences have affected their health and well-being across their academic, athletic, and social spheres of functioning. Through reflexive thematic analysis, I gathered that (a) the athletes believed that football defines and limits them, (b) they felt misunderstood and isolated on campus, (b) they were dehumanized and criminalized, and (d) they were physically and psychologically exhausted from chronic racial mistreatment. Despite the NCAA making positive strides toward addressing mental health concerns within collegiate athletics, there remains a clear need for more support and nourishment regarding the mental health of Black male college athletes, particularly football players. Further results and implications are discussed.

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BLACK MALE COLLEGIATE FOOTBALL PLAYERS' EXPERIENCES OF RACIAL MISTREATMENT AND ITS EFFECTS: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

As college students, athletes will experience general stressors during their academic tenure, including managing academic demands, developing relationships with peers, forming new identities, and handling finances (Anglin & Wade, 2007). Athletes, however, also will face unique stressors, such as being exhausted from physical training, becoming physically injured, traveling and missing school, and being expected to continuously perform at a high level, to name just a few (Cosh & Tully, 2015; Giacobbi et al., 2004). The combination of these general and sport-specific stressors can contribute to psychological distress and other forms of dis-health (Anglin & Wade, 2007; Beamon, 2014; Davoren & Hwang, 2014; Greenleaf et al., 2009; Petrie et al., 2008). For example, large numbers of male and female athletes have reported depressive symptoms (21% - 28%) and anxiety-related concerns (33% - 50%; Davoren & Hwang, 2014), as well as elevated levels of eating disordered behaviors (Greenleaf et al., 2009; Petrie et al., 2008). Further, oppressive forces associated with race (racism) and sex (sexism) may create additional stress and, perhaps, disproportionate levels of psychological distress.

Being a Black male athlete, particularly in revenue-producing sports (i.e., basketball and football), represents an interaction of identities that are dealing with masculine socialization (e.g., Connell, 1995; Ramaeker & Petrie, 2019; Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2012) and racial inequalities and discrimination (Beamon, 2008; 2014; Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2012). For example, male athletes in the United States are socialized to be aggressive, maintain heterosexual self-presentation (Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2012), play through injury and be "tough," endorse violence, and engage in risky behaviors (Ramaeker & Petrie, 2019). Conforming to these masculine norms can lead to social disconnection, depression, increased alcohol use, and

ultimately lower likelihood of seeking psychological help for these concerns (Ramaeker & Petrie, 2019; Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2012). For Black athletes, they historically have had their worth and value intimately tied to their sport performances, such as an ongoing emphasis of athletic, over academic, abilities (Beamon, 2008). Consistent with this emphasis, Black male athletes may not have been given adequate academic preparation for college and, once admitted, may be stereotyped by their professors and peers as dumb, unmotivated, unreliable, and "problem" students who see themselves as superior to others (Beamon, 2014). Black male athletes also experience discrimination and racism within their sports, across their campuses, and within the larger community in which they reside (Beamon, 2014; Edwards, 2000; Melendez, 2008). Thus, the intersection of racial, gender, and athletic identities may present such a unique set of stressors and experiences, and heightened negative effects, to warrant focused study.

Black athletes were allowed on to collegiate teams in the 1960s. This decision to permit their participation did not arise from a place of justice and equity, but rather one of exploitation rooted in the belief that Black athletes could help teams win and thus increase athletic department revenues (Hodge et al., 2008). Although students at their universities, Black male athletes were subjected to racial slurs from other students on campuses, excluded from social activities, targeted for physical and verbal abuse, exploited for their athletic skills, and neglected academically (Beamon, 2014; Brooks & Althouse, 2013). Such mistreatments occurred predominantly for the Black athletes who played at predominantly white institutions (PWIs; Brooks & Althouse, 2013). Although blatant bigotry has been mostly eradicated from institutional policies beginning in the 21st century, Black athletes at PWIs still experience both individual (i.e., face-to-face, hostile acts of a person toward a racial group) and institutional (i.e., systemic, cumulative, and covert acts ingrained into the everyday practices of institutions that

negatively affect subordinate groups) racism (Beamon, 2014; Cooper, 2016; Feagin & Feagin, 2012). For example, athletic teams often require Black athletes to conform to what is deemed a part of the "team culture," which in reality may be a reflection of the white dominant culture. In a recent external review at the University of Iowa, many Black football players felt like they were isolated, targeted, and unwelcome on their team and within the larger athletic department (Husch Blackwell, 2020).

Throughout their decades of involvement in collegiate sports, Black male athletes have been deliberately and systematically exploited for their athletic skills and talent and sold a narrative that promised they would achieve success and social mobility through their college education (Brooks & Althouse, 2013). However, Black male college athletes generally are not recruited with the intention of achieving academic success; rather, they are recruited to provide PWIs with athletic labor to generate revenue, enhance visibility, and expand institutional reputations through their success in sport (Cooper, 2016; *Ross v. Creighton University*, 1990; *Taylor v. Wake Forest University*, 1972). This exploitation also communicates the narrative that Black men's worth is based within their athletic abilities (Beamon, 2008). For example, some Black male college athletes reported being identified solely by their athletic status on campus (Cooper & Hawkins, 2014) despite holding many identities (e.g., athlete, student, male) and having numerous responsibilities (e.g., constant balancing of many roles, pressure to grow up quickly and make difficult life decisions; Sadberry & Mobley, 2013). Further perpetuating this stereotype, Black male college athletes in revenue-producing sports are expected to commit the majority of their time and effort to athletics (Hyatt, 2003), which pulls them away from devoting more time and energy to their student roles. Consequently, Black male athletes are viewed as having less intellectual aptitude than their white peers (Harrison & Boyd, 2007; Hodge et al.,

2008). When combined with university eligibility standards and qualification requirements for athletic scholarships, these expectations are examples of institutional racism that disproportionately affect Black college student-athletes (Brooks & Althouse, 2013).

Contributing to this institutional racial mistreatment is the lack of representation of African American faculty and leaders (Edwards, 2000; Hall, 2001; Melendez, 2008), particularly within athletic department administration and in head football coach positions (NCAA, 2010). Bimper (2015) found that Black male college football players have even tried explicitly addressing this apparent lack of representation by calling on athletic administration to hire more people of color in leadership positions (e.g., head coaches), yet PWIs endorse a colorblind ideology that facilitates the perception that racism or discrimination do not contribute to various inequalities (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). This ideology indirectly communicates that Black people are inherently underqualified and lack the necessary abilities for leadership positions and further perpetuates the stereotype that Black individuals' primary (sole) role is that of the athlete within their sport. Due to PWIs' lack of awareness or unwillingness to acknowledge their contributions to racial inequality, and the lack of representation and mentorship for Black male college athletes, the real and detrimental racial mistreatment of these athletes often goes overlooked, invalidated, and unaddressed (Bimper, 2015; Bonilla-Silva, 2017).

Historically, Black male athletes have endured racism, discrimination, isolation, and other racial inequalities both overt (e.g., hostile treatment by peers and professors) and covert (e.g., underfunded schools, lack of encouragement for academic success; Beamon, 2014; Brooks & Althouse, 2013; Martin, 1993), and much of this treatment persists today in college athletics, particularly at PWIs where these athletes are exploited for their athletic abilities (Edwards, 2000; Melendez, 2008). This chronic and pervasive mistreatment is detrimental to Black male college

athletes' well-being (Beamon, 2014; Davoren & Hwang, 2014; Steinfeldt et al., 2010), and is

specifically seen in difficulty adjusting to college (Lapchick, 2011) and lower graduation rates

than white counterparts and Black non-athletes (Iacobelli, 2020), interpersonal problems and

social isolation (Sadberry & Mobley, 2013), anxiety and depression (Davoren & Hwang, 2014),

and lower likelihood to seek help for these concerns (Ramaeker & Petrie, 2019; Steinfeldt &

Steinfeldt, 2012). Black male athletes can even feel isolated from and mistreated by other Black

students on campus, particularly if they neglected to engage in social justice movements on

campus due to pressures felt from coaches and teams (Beamon, 2014). Both Melendez (2008),

who surveyed six current Black male college football players, and Beamon (2014), who

surveyed 20 former Black male college athletes in revenue sports, found that this isolation

extended to the cite in which the athletes attended college and existed within their teams; in each

instance, the athletes felt unwelcome and disconnected (Beamon, 2014). Such effects may be

exacerbated for Black male athletes at PWIs where they have to spend their cognitive and

affective resources dedicated to assimilation and social expectations, such as navigating

prejudicial beliefs and attitudes from faculty and peers across campus (Beamon, 2014), while

their peers can allocate their resources elsewhere (Steinfeldt et al., 2010).

  Although it is a truth that Black male college athletes have endured racial mistreatment

for decades (Beamon, 2014; Brooks & Althouse, 2013), research examining the experiences of

these athletes in revenue sports in Power Five conferences, as well as the effect of this

mistreatment on their health and well-being, has been sparse and limited in terms of

methodology and how data are analyzed. For example, some studies have focused on only

narrow areas of the student-athletes' experiences, such as how they conform to masculine norms

and their help-seeking attitudes (Eitzen, 2000; Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2012). Others have been

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based on small samples (only using four athletes; Singer, 2005) or samples of athletes drawn from a single university (Melendez, 2008); in both instances, applicability of the findings are constrained. Finally, some studies have sampled retired collegiate athletes (ranging from less than a year to 25 years retired; Beamon, 2014), asking them to reflect retrospectively on their experiences while active competitors; such reflections can be affected by the passage of time. Finally, given the movements for social justice and racial equality that have taken root since the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, there is a need to examine Black male athletes' current experiences within the context of this movement and the racist sport structures in which they live (Asmelash, 2020; Horn, 2020).

Thus, the purpose of my study was to (a) examine current Black male college football players' experiences of racial mistreatment within their lives in general, and their collegiate sport experiences in particular, and (b) learn how these experiences have affected their physical and psychological health and well-being across their academic, athletic, and social spheres of functioning. I used "racial mistreatment," as opposed to more specific terms such as racism or social justice, so as not to unintentionally limit them in the experiences they chose to share. Racial mistreatment served as an umbrella under which the athletes could describe and discuss any experiences in which they felt mistreated because of their race, regardless of whether they more specifically considered the experienced to have occurred due to bias, prejudice, discrimination, inequality, racism, social injustices, and others. Additionally, because race is socially constructed (Obach, 1999), and its components (e.g., events, meanings, experiences) stem from how race is discussed within a societal context, particularly in athletics, it was important to allow the athletes to contextualize their experiences. Through the interviews that served as my data collection, the Black male college football players were provided a space in

which they could elaborate on their experiences while they were still immersed within the athletic, campus, and community environments in which the mistreatments occurred.

Method

Participants

Participants were 13 self-identifying Black/African American male football players who were participating at the NCAA Division I level at schools within the Power Five conferences (i.e., Atlantic Coast Conference [ACC], $n = 2$ [15.4%]; Big Ten Conference, $n = 3$ [23.1%]; Big 12 Conference, $n = 3$ [23.1%]; Pac-12 Conference, $n = 3$ [23.1%]; Southeastern Conference [SEC]; $n = 2$ [15.4%]). The athletes were between 20 and 23 years old ($M_{age} = 21.6$ years; $SD = 0.96$) and all 13 (100%) identified as straight/heterosexual. Athletes reported being single and not in any form of romantic relationship ($n = 7$; 53.8%), single and in a committed romantic relationship ($n = 4$; 30.8%), single and in a non-committed relationship ($n = 1$; 7.7%), and in a domestic partnership ($n = 1$; 7.7%). All 13 (100%) lived off-campus in the community in which their schools were located; ten (69.2%) lived with at least one other person and three (23.1%) lived alone. Athletes' reported that their families' income ranged from the bracket $0 - $10k to over $151k (see Table 1). Athletes were evenly split between defensive ($n = 7$; 53.8%) and offensive ($n = 6$; 46.2%) positions and ranged from sophomore/redshirt-sophomore to graduate student/graduate transfer (see Table 1); five (38.5%) had transferred schools at some point during their college career (i.e., after sophomore year, $n = 3$ [60%]; graduate transfer, $n = 2$ [40%]). On average, they had played football for 13.5 years ($SD = 3.7$); 12 (92.3%) athletes were on a full athletic scholarship. The athletes reported their playing status, which is detailed in Table 1.

Measures

Demographics

Athletes provided their age, sexual orientation, relationship status, family's socioeconomic status, current living situation, individuals living with them, position they played, year in school, total years having played current sport, if they had ever transferred, scholarship status, and playing status.

Interviews

Interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 52 and 97 minutes ($M = 68.7$; $SD = 11.2$). I used open-ended questions to prompt the athletes to think about the racial mistreatments they had experienced and the effect that the described situations had on their psychological well-being and other facets of their lives. Specifically, I asked athletes about their experiences of racial mistreatment (e.g., As a Black male college football player, have you ever been mistreated because of your race? Would you mind telling me about any specific situations or incidents that have occurred?), other athletes' experiences of racial mistreatment (e.g., Did you witness or hear about other Black male college football players, like teammates or friends, being mistreated because of their race?), and the effect of the events on their psychological well-being (e.g., How did that make you feel when that happened? How did that impact your mental health?), on their relationships with others (e.g., How did that change your relationships with your teammates? With your coaches? With your friends?), their academics (e.g., How did that impact how well you did in that class? How did that impact how you felt about academics?), and their athletics (e.g., How did that impact your performance on the field?).

Procedures

Following approval from my university's Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research, I used three strategies to recruit participants; recruitment occurred during summer 2021. First, I directly messaged Black college football players via Instagram who had publicly

shared their views on social justice concerns and their experiences as athletes in collegiate sports. Second, I sent direct messages to all the Black football players at each institution within the Power Five Conferences. Third, at the end of each interview I used snowball sampling, asking each participant "Do you know any other Black male college football players, such as teammates or friends at other schools, who you think might be interested in participating in this study?" Each recruitment message included the expectations for athletes' participation (i.e., online demographic questionnaire, interview, time), study purpose, and how to participate. I arranged individual interview times for each athlete and sent them the Qualtrics link where they provided consent and demographic information.

I conducted interviews via cloud-computing telecommunications software (i.e., Zoom Video Communications). I began each interview by providing a brief reminder as to the study's purpose, inviting them to ask questions, and asking them to describe how their involvement in football (e.g., length, enjoyment). I then moved into the structured questions, starting with their experiences of racial mistreatment; I used prompts and follow-up questions for clarification and more details (e.g., What specific emotions did you experience when [that event] happened to you?). At the end of the interview, I asked if there was anything else related to what we had been discussing or anything I had not asked about that they would like to share. Finally, I thanked them for their participation. Each athlete received a $50 e-gift card for his participation. I digitally recorded all interviews and then transcribed them verbatim; athletes' interviews and demographic data were matched via a unique code number.

Data Analysis

I used reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) to analyze the athletes' responses. RTA is not constrained to a particular theoretical or epistemological framework and can be flexibly applied

across theoretical, epistemological, and ontological perspectives to provide a complex and detailed account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019; Braun et al, 2016). Because race is socially constructed (Obach, 1999), and thus components of race (e.g., events, realities, meanings, experiences) are products of how race is portrayed and discussed within a societal context, particularly in athletics, I used a social constructionist lens (i.e., patterns are deemed as socially produced; Braun & Clarke, 2006). I engaged with the data primarily at the latent (i.e., versus semantic) level to analyze the underlying meaning behind the athletes' responses to examine the essence of the data, rather than code for the explicit content of each response. I conducted my analysis through a combined inductive and deductive approach as I followed the six-phase approach outlined in Braun et al. (2016): 1) familiarization, 2) coding, 3) theme development, 4) theme refinement, 5) naming, and 6) writing.

I transcribed each interview verbatim and shared each transcript with the third author. We familiarized ourselves with the data by independently and thoroughly reading the transcribed interviews, while informally analyzing them to increase familiarity with participants' responses and making note of unique features or data points that seemed relevant and significant. Following this initial phase, we each systematically and extensively coded the responses to find specific meanings and used these meanings to guide the developing analysis. Specifically, we read the data closely (i.e., line by line) and identified important segments of the data using a specific code (i.e., word or short phrase that accurately captured the underlying meaning behind the response). We generated multiple codes through an open, yet systematic, coding process before confirming a coherent and cohesive coding scheme. In order to ensure a final structure that adequately captured the robust data presented by the athlete, and to align with best practices (Braun et al., 2016), we reviewed the data and coded the responses twice.

During theme development, the second author entered the data analysis process and worked with me to ensure codes were organized into subthemes according to patterns of similarity within the codes and importance related to the research questions; the third author shifted into serving as the "critical friend" (Smith & McGannon, 2018). The second author and I met to discuss similarities between subthemes and underlying meaning being conveyed by the subtheme; any discrepancies were reconciled through discussion until consensus was reached (Campbell et al., 2013). Once the subthemes were finalized and agreed upon, I began organizing them into higher order themes that grouped them together based on underlying similarities. When theme and subtheme similarities emerged, I converged them and reconfigured the organization to reflect relevant and important understanding of how the data answered the research questions. During theme refinement, the critical friend reviewed the thematic structure, asked questions regarding the reasoning for groupings and theme generation, provided feedback and suggestions, and, ultimately, confirmed the identified themes and subthemes. We subsequently reviewed the themes, redefined them as needed, and agreed on a final thematic structure. Once we reviewed the themes and determined that they both sufficiently represented the richness of the data and addressed the research questions, we named and organized them into a comprehensive analytic narrative (i.e., descriptive and interpretive commentary presented to the reader; Braun et al., 2016).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness parallels reliability and validity in quantitative analyses, and is comprised of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004). I attended to each of these components in my study. For example, I engaged in methods of thematic analysis that were well-established in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2016;

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2019), and each athlete participated voluntarily. All authors were very familiar with the culture of college athletics due to their own backgrounds in collegiate sports and their professional experiences as sport psychology consultants; the lead author had played football in college and the third author identifies as African American. I provided athletes with a confidential environment for the interviews to facilitate their honest responding. I also engaged in iterative questioning to probe and revisit responses throughout the interviews. As an analytic team, we conducted debriefing sessions, relating the study's findings to the existing body of research and engaging in reflective commentary through journaling and a reflexivity statement (see below) to establish credibility. To increase transferability, I surveyed demographic data for each athlete and included athletes across different football positions, teams, conferences, and geographic areas. I addressed dependability by detailing my procedures and data analysis to allow for replication. Finally, I addressed confirmability by acknowledging limitations of the study, engaging in reflective commentary, and exploring potential biases and assumptions with the analysis team.

Reflexivity Statement

Because the subjectivity of researchers in qualitative analyses can affect the study being conducted, including data analysis and interpretation, it is necessary to know their identities (e.g., race, gender) and relevant experiences (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). All members of the analytic team self-identified as cisgender, two as men and one as a woman. The two men identified as white, whereas the woman identified as African American. The researchers' ages ranged from late-20s to late-50s, and all had participated in team sports at the collegiate level, ranging from NCAA Division III (football, basketball) to NCAA Division I (basketball, volleyball). All three had been trained and educated in sport psychology and counseling psychology; one was a

licensed psychologist and professor and two were completing APA-Accredited Pre-Doctoral Internships. One is a Certified Mental Performance Consultant (AASP), whereas two were working toward their certifications. The analysts' identity characteristics and experiences informed their understanding and interpretation of the athletes' experiences. For example, as former collegiate athletes, they could relate to the time demands and need to balance multiple identities, while the men also could resonate with navigating masculine norms within male team sports. Additionally, one analyst's racial identity as an African American woman allowed her to relate to experiences as an athlete within the Black/African American community, as well as a Black/African American athlete within the collegiate community. Further, the diversity across race, age, and gender within the data analytic team members fostered credibility and minimized bias via multiple intersectional lenses.

Results

Based on the reflective thematic analysis, I present a thematically-based narrative of Black male college football players' experiences of racial mistreatment, as well as how such mistreatments have affected their health and well-being. I describe the athletes' experiences within the context of four higher order themes: (1) football defines and limits me, (2) being Black at a PWI: feeling misunderstood and isolated, (3) being Black at a PWI: dehumanized and criminalized, and (4) Black fatigue: the effects of dealing with football and racism. Within each theme, I use participant quotes to represent the identified subthemes that demonstrate the athletes' experiences, and effects, of racial mistreatment. The names used are pseudonyms. In Table 2, I present an overview of the themes and subthemes.

Football Defines and Limits Me

The athletes shared their experiences of how coaches, peers, faculty, community

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members, and others saw them only as Black male football players, describing instances where

individuals voiced assumptions, and/or held perceptions, about them:

> Just…the way that I feel like people look at…Black athletes in college, you know. I feel like there's automatically…a misconception that we are all there because of athletics, we're not smart, the only reason we got into school is because we play ball...and oh he's just here to play football. (Alex).

These assumptions played out in terms of how teachers, and white classmates, interacted

with the players. For instance, Myles shared "I would just say…just most teachers thinking

I…automatically needed help…I mean…I'm just as good as the next student, you know, you

don't have to make sure that I'm following along in class or just checking on me." In another

instance, an athlete shared:

> I had a couple classmates…and week after week I get asked, okay…what'd you make on this assignment? And my grades tended to be higher than theirs. And…they were so confused about it, like how is this possible? Like…how are you getting better grades than me? They even proceeded to ask me if I was cheating, you know. (Stanley).

These assumptions seemed to be held primarily by individuals not associated with the football

program. As Jorge explained:

> I know there was one of my academic advisors, like I said…not the ones who work specifically with the football team, but…they would basically try to give me the easiest class schedule possible because they one: either thought that I didn't want to challenge myself and care about…my academic future, or they just didn't think I had the mental aptitude to…do well in the course. I know she had a moment of shock when…she looked at…my grades from high school and then my test scores?

The players experienced football as a business that was impersonal and concerned only

about their performances:

> [Football] is a business. That's basically what Power Five football is…it's a business…And you learned quickly that it's a business, and [the coaches] don't really give a damn about you personally. It's what you can do for them…Like they preach family, and they preach team and stuff like that, but it's a business at the end of the day. They're about Ws and Ls. They don't really care about what's going on in your personal life, or what's going on behind the scenes, if you're going through something mentally,

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or if your family [is]…having family problems, they could care less about that. It's a business. (Jaden).

As a business, the players understood that they were replaceable and their value was based on how they performed:

I was always taught like, this is a business. Like, no matter what goes on like you need to make sure you perform well in a game, because you can easily be replaced, like football's the type of sport where you can be replaced, it's all about what you've done for me lately. (Kerry).

Myles reflected further on being disposable:

Like your life ultimately is in their hands, like my life was in their hands, and they literally let me go and didn't care about my life at all whatsoever. It was like bye bye, you just a product of the system. We have another person coming in to replace you.

From the athletes' perspectives, their identities as football players determined others' (e.g., coaches, fans) care and acceptance of them. Alex stated:

I feel like man the fans...the fans really only like us because you know, we're football players. And if we are regular Black students or Black people in the area, they probably wouldn't give a damn about us... And also that same thing go with coaches too...If we weren't good football players...they would not care about us.

Similar reactions came from the broader community as well as classmates:

Yeah and just being an athlete for a university like, that's what makes us accepting you know by…I hate to say it but by white people in the community when you're in the college town, because you can't be just an average Black person…they won't accept you. (Myles).

Jerry added: "I know you're only talking to me because I'm an athlete. If I was a regular student, you probably wouldn't talk to me." Antoine affirmed this narrative about how Black football players' identities are perceived and (de)valued in the U.S.: "They only love me because I play football. They don't love me for who I am, which is a Black/African American, which in the United States…it's hard."

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Being Black at a PWI: Feeling Misunderstood and Isolated

All the athletes attended a predominantly white institution (PWI), and described

experiences of being misunderstood within that context. Jorge attributed these experiences to a

lack of exposure to, and understanding of, diverse groups of people: "Being at a PWI in a very

predominantly white city and university, you sort of do see that, you know, they just don't have

as many…as much experience with diversity, so they're not used to [diversity]." When a player

transferred from an HBCU to their current PWI, the lack of understanding was palpable:

> And coming from a HBCU, which is all, you know, pretty much 90% African Americans,
> you're with your culture, you understand your culture, you understand like the history of
> it. And when I came here, it was just, like, a complete 180. Like I knew what I was
> getting myself into, but I just didn't know the impact of bein' a African American here.
> (Antoine).

Athletes also described how the geographic location of their universities played a role:

> Like because here in…the Midwest, in [state] where there really isn't a lot of minorities,
> you know what I mean? So you would think like, okay you gon' really experience some
> stuff like that, some kind of racism or anything like that. (Stanley).

Alex agreed:

> But same time this is deep south, you know, [university's state], you know, I wouldn't
> expect nobody there to not be racist, you know, that's what I would literally guess.
> There's some like…probably near [university], that is very racist. So it didn't surprise
> me.

The players described how others' misunderstandings and assumptions can have a

profound effect on just how comfortable they can be within the spaces they occupy. Jerry's

experiences illustrated this struggle:

> I go in [the classroom] like, teacher asks questions and sometimes you kinda just a little
> nervous to answer, not necessarily not knowing the answer but…just bein' comfortable to
> speak out and kinda just be yourself around a bunch of people that don't look like you.
> So, I guess…just bein' yourself in the classroom, because I feel like everyone else around
> me are kinda bein' themselves. And I'm kinda just like, holding myself in a little bit and
> just trying to do what I think is right, I guess…I just can't, I can't…I can't be. [Jerry]

Stephen added: "It can be difficult sometimes, you know, thinking that you can't really express yourself because…you know, you can feel restricted…feel censored, feel like you have to conform to a certain standard or something." Stanley elaborated on just how pervasive and profound this effect can be:

> I…realize that people that look like me are bein'…are not, are not bein' treated equally. And it just makes you feel like…you beneath everybody…Whenever you in different groups or whatever, I get around people that don't look like me, and no matter…how much I try to…make myself feel like…I'm just as equal as they are…I'm just as good as them, like everything that they can do I can do. I still feel like I gotta be a certain type of person around, around them. There's certain things that I feel like I can't do.

Sadly, this lack of personal comfort extends into football, too:

> There could be like a white coach, and a Black athlete…and a lot of times, if [the athlete sees] something that's wrong, they'll feel like it's not appropriate to say something to that coach because like…if the coach takes it the wrong way, they could impact their playing time, impact their position…so a lot of times…a lot of Black players don't feel comfortable talking to their coaches about certain things that's going on within the program or outside of the program. (Kerry).

The players connected feeling misunderstood to a sense of isolation and a lack of belonging, sometimes due to being the only Black student in a classroom: "I feel like there's been multiple times in class where I just feel like everybody's kind of looking at me like I don't belong here." (Alex)…and…"Yeah, I would just say I just felt like real like…just, real like… I don't know, just like out of place." (Tom). Jerry added:

> I definitely felt like, uncomfortable, like certain classrooms and things just because like, most times I'm the only Black person in there. So it's not like, I'm not…scared to be around a room full of people that don't look like me, but it does get a little uncomfortable sometimes, because you don't really see too many people like you in like a college classroom all the time.

Being Black at a PWI: Dehumanized and Criminalized

The athletes' experiences of being Black at a PWI extended beyond simply being misunderstood as they described direct, and indirect, instances of being mistreated because of

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their race. Such mistreatments occurred in person, as well as through social media, and led to

them feeling dehumanized and/or criminalized in their being. Consistently, the athletes described

similar instances of being racially profiled by the police:

> Me and my roommate were walking from McDonalds one night and a cop car pulled up on us and drew their guns and, like, put us in cuffs just because we fit a description, and we were just walking home…and I know that's happened to a couple of teammates. (Jorge).

Such mistreatment occurred when they were in their family's neighborhood:

> I live on the quote unquote white side of town, and I was out, and I was just walking to my grandma's house, which is in…a higher scale neighborhood…And the cops driving by pulled over, they looked at me, and they got out the car, and I was looking at them, they like "Hold on sir, hold on." And I'm like, "What's up?" And then they were like, "What are you doing over here?" I'm like "What the hell you mean I'm doing over here, like? Do you have any problems with me?" And they're like, "No, you shouldn't be over here." I was like, "What the fuck you mean I shouldn't be over here, I live here. What are you talking about? My grandma's around the block, I'm going to see her." And then they were like, "Oh well we're just…we're just making sure, because we don't really see too many people around here like you." I was like, "Hold on. That's fucked up." And they were like, "Oh don't…don't get aggressive," and I was like looking at 'em, and their hands were on their belts and stuff. I was like "Alright cool bro, do what…do whatever you want. Like what do you want to ask?" And they were like, "Yeah well, just make sure you know your house…we're just making sure that everything's okay over here…there's not very many times you see people of your size and stature and whatnot bein' over here." And I was like, alright, that's cool. (Kofi).

Finally, Kerry was interrogated by police when he was on his home turf…the football complex:

> I was leaving our facilities...and a cop pulled me over…And he told me to…get off my moped…and he just started …grilling, like quizzing me. Like he was asking me like certain questions that only football players would know...The gist of it was, he was giving me a background check, because like I told him I was a football player and I was just coming from studying...and he pulled me over...I think it's because I was [a] Black male at night by the football facilities…like I just knew all the questions he was asking me was to make sure that I was a football player.

> Many athletes reflected on experiences in which they felt degraded, dehumanized, and

disregarded, often being viewed as less valuable than their white athlete counterparts and white

people in general. Alex described one such experience at what originally was a peaceful

gathering:

> I will say something that did happen was…whenever we had…our own little peaceful protests…like a freakin' little mini parade of all these Confederate trucks and everybody was honking their horn and drove on the street trying to block the street off. Like y'all are blatantly racist.

Brandon described his experiences going into grocery stores: "Usually, more than likely I

just, I just get looked at differently, especially by older, older white people. They kind of look at

me like I'm some type of thing that just came out the zoo." Jaden shared a similar experience he

had when interacting with peers who knew he played for the football team: "[We're] just getting

treated like, just like animals really. Like a show. I think we…I think as a unit we just get

[treated like]…they're athletes so...they're not human." He went on to say:

> It's like, I'm human too…I'm the same exact person…I'm just as human as you are, so...like, damn…that's what we're doing? Like…why was that okay for you to say, just because I'm an athlete or whatever? Like why do you think…why is that okay to say that any time?

These dehumanizing experiences also extended to some athletes' interactions with coaches, as

Kerry discussed:

> I play offensive line, and…there's not a lot of Black offensive linemen out there. So, my coach would…single us out, or like cuss us out, because there was only like three Black offensive linemen at the time. Or like he would tell us, like you're not shit.

Antoine described how these types of events reminded him of how he feels limited because of

his race: "It just reminds you where you come from, you know. Every single day you gotta

remind yourself, you're Black, you're Black/African American, you can't do the things other

people...can do."

Almost all athletes recalled moments in which they were recipients of explicit hate

speech and racial slurs, particularly the "N-word." Brandon reflected on one such experience:

I was…in front of my dorm, and this…red station wagon pulled up. And it…was a bunch of white kids. And they basically…just kind of stopped, slowed down, and yelled out the N-word, but they put the E-R at the end. I was like wow, and then they drove off.

Several athletes described being targeted with these slurs while on the field of play:

I think the fans…they can get away with certain things they can say, and nothing will happen…like fans, they say some things that you really don't want to repeat, but it's…it's tough...I've been called monkey before, the N-word, the hard E-R word. (Jaden).

Kerry shared similar experiences: "Just playing football you're always facing…racism, like, on and off the field. I mean…people, they can make slurs while you're playing." Further, the players recounted how teammates have received threatening messages following performances:

We had a Black receiver, he had a good game and whatnot, and somebody DM'd him, was calling him a porch monkey to him, tellin' him to go hang himself, all this stuff. I mean, you see that very often, and it's just, it's BS. (Kofi).

Many of the athletes acknowledged the reality that being subjected to dehumanizing slurs and pejorative language remained commonplace in the lives of Black male college football players.

The athletes also shared events that would be termed microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007), even from their own coaches: "I remember like…there was this one coach my freshman year…he would…confuse our names. Like he would call me the name of another Black offensive lineman, even though we don't look alike at all." (Kerry). Such incidents also occurred with their university peers:

I went to a party one time, and everybody's like, acting all buddy buddy with me, you know, and then I look on the wall, and it's a big ass confederate flag with the words "If The South Would've Won" at the bottom…and I feel like that was like completely racist and fake as hell for y'all to be, you know, buddy buddy in my face…but knowing that if the South would've won I would have been a freakin slave. (Alex).

These mistreatments were not isolated to face-to-face encounters, as Brandon explained:

Uh, it's definitely been on social media. I mean, you know, everyone has their BS pages that they post stuff on and just want to troll and mess around and get under people's skin, and I mean you see that all across the country.

Jorge shared similar thoughts: And…like I said it's usually through social media, like nobody would ever, especially fans, would…actually confront you in person about that."

Black Fatigue: The Effects of Dealing with Football and Racism

The myriad racial mistreatments the athletes had experienced were not benign and could not just be ignored; these events affected their psychological well-being in adverse ways and left them with an overall sense of fatigue. Athletes described feelings of anger, frustration, and irritation, and, at times, wanting to express their feelings through fighting. James described the frustration he felt when, every time he got into a vehicle, he had to prepare himself for the real possibility that he would be pulled over by the police: "[It's] annoying and frustrating that, you know, we even have to think about stuff like that." Jaden shared similar emotions:

It's frustrating because I shouldn't have to [keep myself calm and go through preparations to make sure I keep myself safe]. It shouldn't even have to be like that. It shouldn't ever have to be like that and it's very frustrating…why do I have to do this? Why do I have to do all this, just to…make you feel safe so you don't shoot me? And that's, I think that's the most irritating, part.

Others shared the anger they felt in response to being racially mistreated: "But I was just so mad, like I was…I was…I'm mad," (Kerry)…and…"Oh, I mean I was very angry. I was livid," (Myles)…and…"Yeah, now that really pissed me off. That one had me mad. And me, you know, when somebody does that like, like I said, I'm not afraid to talk how I feel, and I'm not afraid to fight if I gotta fight" (Alex).

Being mistreated by coaches, peers, and people in the community also caused athletes to feel anxious, sad, and distressed. Kerry described how his coach's criticisms affected him:

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He already expressed disbelief in my abilities, and like I'm not shit, not calling me by my name. And so like, how is he judging me…he must be criticizing me like constantly? Like comparing me to everybody…so that's where that anxiety came from.

Tom discussed feelings that emerged from class interactions: "I just think I felt awkward in the class like…it was just like a real awkward moment. And if anything it just heightened my anxiety in class." He went on to say: "I just felt inferior because I was the only African-American in the classroom. So, like people were just looking at me. And I just had a lot of anxiety in the moment." Stanley added: "I guess you can feel like sometimes…you just not good enough. You know, nothing is really ever enough." Jaden highlighted the longer-term effect of repeatedly being mistreated:

Sometimes you can't explain it…sometimes it's just, everything is going good but sometimes you're just not happy for some reason. You can't even really explain why you…not happy, but there's a reason…you're just not happy, and it sucks, because you have days like that, and like…it'll be like weeks or consecutive weeks, and you just feel like, like just down.

The athletes felt shame, particularly when they did not stand up for themselves when they were being mistreated. Tom offered his experience:

I think it affected me just because I felt like I should have said something in that sense…I felt bad about myself just because I didn't say anything. Like I felt ashamed about it…I should have confronted her about it, but I didn't say anything, so…I just felt kind of weak for that.

Further, Antoine described how this sense of shame extended to questioning his cultural identity:

So it kinda makes me feel like, am I really supportin' my culture? Am I really supporting the African American culture? Like am I really…a African American male? And that kinda hits me every once in a while…[I] realize that I need to do something right now, and that was my biggest problem far as when the mental kicked in, where I had these bad thoughts of like…dang, I'm not really African American. I don't, I don't, I don't stand for African Americans, and that really hurt sometimes.

The fear for their lives that they experienced in relation to police interactions was visceral. Brandon reflected on this fear: "You know that it can be dangerous [in my hometown],

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but it's even more dangerous that even when you encounter a police officer, you're fearing for

your life." Stephen detailed fears about "what if:"

> This could be me, you know, it could have been me easily. And then, and then, that's like the fear in the back of your head. This could have happened to me. You realize oh shit. It could have easily been anybody I know, friend of mine.

Jaden was very clear about the intense feelings he has in relation to the police:

> I fear for my life every time a cop is around. There should not be a reason why I get nervous when there's a cop around. I should be feeling protected and feel safe. That's the complete opposite when I see a cop. I'm very scared, I'm worried, I'm on my heels. It's tough. It's really tough.

> In going through their experiences of feeling exploited and disposable, misunderstood

and isolated, dehumanized and criminalized, and balancing the harsh demands of football, the

athletes were physically and psychologically exhausted:

> I got through it at the end of the time, but it was, it was tough going through [that], going to work, basically every day, doing this shit six-seven hours a day, and class on top of that. Football, it was…tough going through that. (Jaden).

> Antoine added: "Football, like you said, football it's tough, it's hard, you know, it's a lot,

it's a lot of pressure on you. And bein' able to deal with that and with racism, it teaches you a lot

about yourself." Some athletes even described the cumulative toll of the daily mistreatments they

endure. Jorge reflected: "I don't want to say little things, but the things that, you know, to people

who are of color, especially Black Americans…as sad as it is you see this every day." He went

on:

> The mistreatment, especially like when it comes to my safety specifically, or like other people's safety…and it's rooted in racism, I think that's when it's…you handle it well but like I said it takes a lot of energy and you know, space in your head. So, let's say you're having a bad day or you know you're tired and stressed out, you know, or you're…dealing with things, depression, any other mental health things, like throwing that on to it, you know you're not going to handle it nearly as well as you would on a better day.

Discussion

Through semi-structured interviews, the Black male college football players shared their experiences of racial mistreatment within their football programs, universities, and communities, as well as the effect of these mistreatments on their health and well-being across their academic, athletic, and social spheres of functioning. Based on reflexive thematic analysis, I identified four themes (as well as numerous subthemes) that reflected how (a) football defined and limited them and others ignored their non-football identities, (b) they felt misunderstood and isolated by individuals at PWIs who have limited exposure to Black/African American culture, (c) they were dehumanized and criminalized by police, fans, coaches, university faculty and classmates, and community members, and (d) they were physically and psychologically exhausted from consistently dealing with football and racism.

The athletes believed that others could see them only as football players, which cast a shadow over many of their interactions with faculty, classmates, and other university personnel. For example, and consistent with past research, the athletes recounted incidents in which classmates wondered if they had cheated to earn their grades (Simons et al., 2007), teachers assumed they needed extra assistance with course materials (Brooks & Althouse, 2013), and academic advisors assigned them to the easiest classes offered (Beamon, 2008). Most of the athletes also described the cold and impersonal nature of playing football in the Power Five Conferences, stating that it was a business in which coaches only cared about their performances and they knew they were replaceable. For decades, Black athletes have been exploited by PWIs for their athletic talent (Brooks & Althouse, 2013; Hodge et al., 2008); yet these institutions hid under the guise of providing them an education to justify a system that took advantage of their athletic labor and that generated revenue, enhanced visibility, and enriched the reputation of the

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PWIs where they played (Cooper, 2016). Although different than being physically replaced by their coaches, the players also understood that fans', community members', and peers' affection (and acceptance) toward them was based on how they performed on the field; their personhood outside of the gridiron was irrelevant.

As athletes at PWIs, they had to navigate environments that were filled with individuals (e.g., peers, teachers) who had limited exposure to, and understanding of, people with racial/ethnic backgrounds that were different from their own. The result of such experiences was feeling misunderstood and isolated. Having such experiences at PWIs is not new for Black football players (Melendez, 2008) and is often perpetuated by the colorblind ideology that these institutions endorse (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). The misunderstandings and assumptions the players experienced had a profound effect on their comfort level across most of the spaces they occupied, such as feeling unable to be themselves in classrooms, believing they needed to conform to some sort of "white" standard, and/or feeling restricted when interacting with their white coaches. A recent internal investigation of the University of Iowa football program revealed that Black athletes thought they had to conform to a team culture that was perceived as "white" (Husch Blackwell, 2020). As a result, the Iowa players felt isolated, targeted, unwelcome, and unable to be themselves. As has been noted by other researchers (Bimper et al., 2012; Cooper & Hawkins, 2014), the football players in my study believed they were treated differently than white teammates and classmates and that their concerns were often unaddressed.

As exists among Black men in general (Hester & Gray, 2018; Nadal et al., 2017), the athletes were racially profiled, stopped, and interrogated by the police, even when they were in their own neighborhoods or around their sport environments (e.g., football complex). The athletes also recalled many instances, such as being belittled by their coaches because of their

race, that were degrading and disregarding, leading them to question their value and their personhood. Researchers have described how Black male athletes have historically been treated as "other" and have been targets of unfair treatment (Brooks & Althouse, 2013). Some of the mistreatments were dehumanizing. The athletes recounted vivid memories of being targeted with explicit hate speech and racial slurs, being referred to as the "N-word" and porch monkey, and even being encouraged to kill themselves. As has been documented (Beamon, 2014; Brooks & Althouse, 2013), racial slurs, pejorative language, and name-calling have long been commonplace for Black male athletes at PWIs. Although the athletes did experience events that would be termed microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007), the vast majority of what they experienced represented inhumane, yet all too common, encounters with police and with others who, through their behaviors (e.g., making a racial slur), viewed these Black male football players as less than and as other.

The vast array of mistreatments the athletes experienced had a profound effect on their psychological well-being and left them with an overall sense of fatigue (Winters, 2020). They felt angry and frustrated, sometimes to the point of wanting to fight. Although much of their anger and frustration emerged from the general mistreatments they endured, some resulted from having to act a certain way to protect themselves from an entity that's supposed to protect them (i.e., police). Black male athletes, but football players in particular, live under the stereotypical perception that they are angry and aggressive and thus must carefully monitor their emotions and behaviors so as to not suffer negative repercussions from coaches and athletic administration, even when doing so may make them less safe (Jackson et al., 2002). Congruent with previous research on Black male athletes' mental health at PWIs (Brown, 2001; Sadberry & Mobley, 2013), the athletes described feeling distressed about harsh coach criticisms, anxious and inferior

in classrooms, and just sad (and even depressed) from dealing with the daily realities of living within racist systems. These football players also expressed feeling shame when they did not stand up for themselves (or others) when they were being racially mistreated; many thought they should have done more or tried harder, and some even questioned their cultural identity and integrity because of their inaction. Feeling afraid and unsafe were vivid, yet common, emotional reactions offered by several athletes. They shared how the police actually made them feel more unsafe than protected, and recalled thinking "that could have been me" many times while watching violent acts that are perpetrated against Black/African American people all over the U.S. Sadly, this experience is all too familiar for Black men, who consistently watch their identities be routinely demonized and criminalized by society (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016).

Winters (2020) has argued that all members of the Black community are exhausted in body, mind, and heart, and that this fatigue comes from both acute, and chronic (intergenerational), racial mistreatments. As has been noted, the football players experienced numerous acute events (e.g., targeted with racial slurs, racially profiled by police, reduced to only an athlete), but also acknowledged the grinding toll that constantly dealing with football and racist systems has had on their energy, emotions, cognitive and affective resources, and overall mental health. The players' narratives align with previous research that has described the time demands of being an NCAA Division I college football player (Simons et al., 2007), the racism that is part of everyday life for Black male college athletes (Beamon, 2014), and the cognitive and affective resources they must allocate to assimilating and meeting (white) social expectations, leaving them exhausted and with fewer resources to devote to their academics and themselves (Beamon, 2014; Steinfeldt et al., 2010). And, recently, while mental health concerns are significantly elevated among all NCAA student-athletes since the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e.,

1.5 to two times higher than pre-pandemic), Black athletes are experiencing such concerns at disproportionately high levels (NCAA, 2020).

The athletes holistically felt like their identities were reduced to their football performances. They expressed feeling replaceable, disposable, exploited, uncared for, misunderstood, and excluded. They were unfairly stopped and interrogated by police, belittled by authority figures across campus, and targeted with racial slurs and hateful language. Psychologically, the athletes experienced myriad responses: anger, frustration, helplessness, sadness, shame, and mental weakness to name a few. Some athletes even expressed feeling anxious and depressed as a result of cumulative and chronic racial mistreatment. As a result, these athletes are exhausted. And because Black athletes make up nearly half of all NCAA Division I football players (Lapchick, 2010) and represent one of the most affected student-athlete groups regarding mental health concerns (NCAA, 2020), athletic departments, particularly at PWIs, must work to address the concerns and racial mistreatment that Black male football players are still experiencing today.

Limitations

My study had many strengths, including a diverse sample of football players (e.g., different offensive and defensive positions, geographically from across the U.S., representing each Power Five conference), semi-structured interviews that allowed the athletes to expand upon their responses and provide deeper context and emotion pertaining to their experiences, and a reflexive thematic approach that allowed for rich and robust interpretation while also accounting for and challenging my assumptions and biases (Braun & Clarke, 2019), yet several limitations also existed that warrant discussion. First, being a white man carries stimulus value that undeniably affected the athletes' experiences and comfort within the interview, and ability to

trust and feel comfortable sharing their experiences. To minimize this effect, I sought to build trust and rapport by disclosing my personal interest in the study, acknowledging my race and offering open space to discuss the racial dynamics that existed, and inquiring about the athlete's background and interests pertaining to football. Second, the life experiences, such as shaped by race, gender, and sport involvement, of the analytic team defined the lenses through which they analyzed, and organized, the athletes' responses. Although the analytic team shared identities along gender and sport involvement, the two primary coders were white, and this racial difference likely limited their understanding of the players' narrative. Thus, the involvement of a critical friend who held the same racial background as the players helped to minimize this limitation and produce themes and subthemes that more fully reflected the players' lived experiences. Third, all the football players self-selected into the study and thus their described racial mistreatments may not fully represent the experiences of all Black male collegiate football players. However, there was consistency across the players in terms of their experiences and how they were affected, suggesting saturation (Saunders et al., 2018). In future studies, researchers could conduct focus groups to gather data from more athletes without losing the depth and richness of interview responses. Focus groups also would allow for other athletes to agree/disagree with and build off of others' responses, providing more comprehensive data across the sample for experiences that were shared. Finally, although the initial recruitment message specified that I was searching for individuals who self-identified as Black/African American and male, I did not gather specific information pertaining to the athletes' gender identity nor their ethnic background/cultural origins. Future studies should gather this information and explore differences in experiences across individuals with intersecting identities

that may extend outside of the cisgender male identity and incorporate the athlete's ethnic background.

Recommendations

Keeping in mind these limitations, my findings have practical implications for understanding, supporting, and improving Black male college football players' experiences on Power Five football teams, as well as how to change the oppressive systems in which these athletes exist. The athletes provided vivid accounts of being mistreated and how their daily lives are affected psychologically, physically, and academically, which form the foundation for the following clinical, policy, and systemic recommendations:

Clinical Implications

As sport psychologists/counseling professionals continue to understand, support, and treat Black student-athletes' mental health concerns, they need to contextualize their concerns and symptoms within the systemic racism, oppression, and discrimination they experience daily. Doing so shifts the lens from individual/group pathology to symptoms that result from inequitable social systems (Shadravan & Barcelo, 2021).

Although many NCAA Division I athletic departments have internal resources to address athletes' myriad academic and psychological needs (Drew et al., in press; Kiefer et al., in press), there are benefits to forging strong and close relationships with their campuses' student services, and academic, departments. Cultivating these relationships ensures that athletes have access to all student services, similar to any other university student, and increases opportunities for other university members to view athletes as more than athletes.

Coaches must work to shift the narrative that football is just a business and players' worth is found only in their performances. For example, coaches could hold recurring meetings

with their players, ideally 1-on-1 in which they talk about the athlete's interests and other non-football related components of their lives, as well as listen to their concerns and have genuine conversations with them around difficult and complicated issues (Husch Blackwell, 2020). Further, when significant societal events occur (e.g., George Floyd, Breonna Taylor murders), coaches should support their athletes by letting them protest around the community and on campus, as well as giving them opportunities to process the events as a team and in small groups.

Teammates are key supports within any sport team and may be particularly so within large, racially-diverse teams, such as football. Football programs should seek to create opportunities for players to get to know each other beyond a stereotype by providing them with chances to talk and interact in real and meaningful ways.

With how much time athletic trainers and strength and conditioning coaches spend with athletes, and with how important their support is regarding athletes' mental health (Yang et al., 2014), they should receive training from in-house sport psychologists, or from staff at the university's counseling center, on how to engage in conversations about mental health and how to make referrals to mental health specialists.

Policy Considerations

Universities should develop policies regarding fan behaviors, whether in-person or via social media. Such policies should address speech and behaviors, such as described by the athletes in my study, that are disrespectful and dehumanizing, and should contain penalties that would be levied against violators.

Athletic departments, and universities as a whole, should continue investing in more mental health resources for athletes. Many Division I athletic departments, particularly in the Power Five conferences, have 1-2 sport psychologists/counseling professionals that are trained

specifically in mental health and who understand the context of elite athletics. However, across the NCAA Divisions, there is considerable inequity in availability to such "in-house" mental health care (Drew et al., in press). Thus, the NCAA needs to consider how to financially assist schools across all Divisions so there can be equitable access to such care.

Athletic departments and the universities should hire more Black/African American professionals, such as coaches, sport psychologists/mental health professionals, support staff, academic advisors, sports medicine professionals, academic faculty, among others, who interact frequently in the lives of these Black athletes. There remains a disproportionately low representation of Black/African American individuals in leadership positions within athletic departments. Having professionals in higher-level leadership positions provides Black athletes with examples of value being placed on Black/African American identities outside of active sport participation, as well as with mentorship and advising opportunities.

Given that Black athletes continue to graduate at rates lower than their white counterparts (Iacobelli, 2020), athletic departments must take active steps to provide programming that promotes Black athletes' professional development and provided networking opportunities to cultivate relationships and career possibilities for life after sport.

University athletic departments should have 3rd party agencies review their policies to determine how such policies may be disproportionately affecting athletes of color. Such reviews, and the implementation of recommendations for change, should be conducted on a three-year cycle.

Systemic Changes

Existing systems, such as political, educational, and athletic, are the primary contributors to the social injustices and mental health inequities and concerns that Black student-athletes

experience. Thus, a framework of mental health that focuses on social determinants, as opposed to individual or group factors, must be adopted and used to frame discussions, and change, in this area (Shim & Compton, 2021).

Conclusion

Black male athletes have been racially mistreated at PWIs for years (Beamon 2014, Brooks & Althouse, 2013), and the athletes I interviewed reiterated how these experiences are continuously perpetuated to this day. Universities and coaches exploit these football players for their athletic prowess and undervalue other identities they hold, particularly their racial identity. These athletes feel like they don't belong and can't be themselves in many contexts across campus. They also often feel explicitly targeted and dehumanized by fans and peers who call them racial slurs, by police officers who demonize their skin color and unnecessarily interrogate them, and by coaches who belittle them. These experiences have understandably had a significant impact on these athletes' psychological well-being, including heightened anxiety and depressive symptoms, internalized shame, and mental exhaustion. After offering how they've been mistreated and the psychological impact of their experiences, it is clearly communicated that Black male college football players want to be seen, heard, loved, appreciated, cared for, and invested in. Individuals who exist within the environments in which these athletes occupy (e.g., coaches, athletic trainers, faculty, athletic administration) have the opportunity to address these needs and to intentionally engage with these athletes, understand their experiences, and implement tangible changes that can improve their overall well-being. Ultimately, Black male student-athletes, particularly football players, are experiencing mental health concerns at a disproportionately high level (NCAA, 2020) because of the multiple oppressive systems that affect every aspect of their daily lives. Although changes in clinical practice and institutional

policies are needed, such changes often focus on the individual (e.g., teaching new methods of

coping) as opposed to the system that is causing the inequities in their lives. Thus, foundational

changes will result only from a reexamining, and likely a dismantling, of these existing systems

and the creation of new ones based within equity and justice.

Table 1

Athletes' Reported Family Income, Eligibility Year, and Playing Status

Participant	Reported Family Income	Eligibility Year	Playing Status
Stephen	$21k - $30k	Grad Student/Transfer	I am a starter and play more than 50% of the snaps when my position is on the field
Jorge	$111k - $120k	Grad Student/Transfer	I do not start, but I play more than 50% of the snaps when my position is on the field
Myles	$11k - $20k	Senior/Redshirt-Senior	I am a starter and play more than 50% of the snaps when my position is on the field
Kofi	$0 - $10k	Junior/Redshirt-Junior	I am a starter and play more than 50% of the snaps when my position is on the field
Alex	$81k - $90k	Grad Student/Transfer	I am a starter and play more than 50% of the snaps when my position is on the field
James	$111k - $120k	Senior/Redshirt-Senior	I am a starter and play more than 50% of the snaps when my position is on the field
Jerry	$41k - $50k	Junior/Redshirt-Junior	I do not start, and I play less than 50% of the snaps when my position is on the field
Tom	$91k - $100k	Grad Student/Transfer	I am a starter and play more than 50% of the snaps when my position is on the field
Stanley	$0 - $10k	Junior/Redshirt-Junior	I am a starter and play less than 50% of the snaps when my position is on the field
Jaden	$61k - $70k	Junior/Redshirt-Junior	I do not start, and I play less than 50% of the snaps when my position is on the field

(table continues)

Participant	Reported Family Income	Eligibility Year	Playing Status
Kerry	Over $151k	Junior/Redshirt-Junior	I do not start, but I play more than 50% of the snaps when my position is on the field
Antoine	did not report	Junior/Redshirt-Junior	I do not start, but I play more than 50% of the snaps when my position is on the field
Brandon	did not report	Sophomore/Redshirt-Sophomore	I do not start, but I play more than 50% of the snaps when my position is on the field

Table 2

Themes and Related Subthemes

Themes	Related Subthemes
Football defines and limits me	More than a football player
	Football is a business: I am disposable
	You only care about me because I play football
Being Black at a PWI: feeling misunderstood and isolated	Lack of cultural understanding and/or acceptance
	I just can't be me
	I don't belong here
Being Black at a PWI: dehumanized and criminalized	People still call us the "N-word"
	Police see my Blackness as suspicious
	Being viewed and treated as other
	Not all racism is direct: From microaggressions to social media
Black fatigue: The effects of dealing with football and racism	Angry and frustrated
	Anxious, sad, and distressed
	Ashamed and weak
	Afraid for my life: Feeling unsafe around the police
	I'm just tired

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APPENDIX A.

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Please answer the following questions honestly. It is important that you answer every question. There are no "right" or "wrong" answers, so just do the best you can.

What is your age? _____

What is your sexual orientation?

_____Straight/Heterosexual

_____Gay

_____Bisexual

_____Questioning

_____Queer

_____Other (please define _____)

What is your relationship status?

_____Single, not in any form of romantic relationship

_____Single, but in a noncommitted romantic relationship

_____Single, but in a committed romantic relationship

_____Married

_____In a domestic partnership

_____Other (please describe _____)

Do you have children?

_____Yes _____No

If Yes, please indicate the age (in months) of each child you have

Child 1:	Child 2:	Child 3:
____1	____1	____1
____2	____2	____2
____3	____3	____3
____4	____4	____4
____5	____5	____5
____6	____6	____6
____7	____7	____7
____8	____8	____8
____9	____9	____9
____10	____10	____10
____11	____11	____11
____12 (one year)	____12 (one year)	____12 (one year)
____13	____13	____13
____14	____14	____14
_____... (up to 60)	_____... (up to 60)	_____... (up to 60)

Which of the following best describes your current living arrangements?

    ____On-campus housing (e.g., residence hall)

    ____Off -campus housing, specifically in the community where you go to school (e.g., apartment)

    ____In your family's home/apartment

    ____Other (please describe) _____

With how many people do you currently live?

    ____0   ____4   ____8

    ____1   ____5   ____9

    ____2   ____6   ____10 or more

    ____3   ____7

*If client indicates "1" or more for Question 6: For each person with whom you said you currently live, please tell me the relationship of that person to you

    ____Parent/Step-parent

    ____Brother

    ____Sister

    ____Grandparent

    ____Other family member (please list_____)

    ____Friend (who is NOT a teammate)

    ____Friend (who IS a teammate)

    ____Romantic partner

    ____Other (please describe_____)

What is your family's household income?

____$0 - $10K	____$81K - $90K
____$11K – $20K	____$91K - $100K
____$21K - $30K	____$101K - $110K
____$31K - $40K	____$111K - $120K
____$41K - $50K	____$121K - $130K
____$51K - $60K	____$131K - $140K
____$61K - $70K	____$141K - $150K
____$71K - $80K	____Over $151K

In what sport do you participate?

    ____Basketball

    ____Football

What position do you play within your sport? _____

What year are you in school?

    ____Sophomore/RS Sophomore

    ____Junior/RS Junior

    ____Senior/RS Senior

    ____Grad Transfer

How many total years have you participated in your current sport? _____

Have you ever transferred to a different college/university to participate in your sport?

    ____Yes ____No

    If yes, when did you transfer (select the response that best represents your experience)

        ____Before graduating from Junior College

        ____After freshman year

        ____After sophomore year

        ____After junior year

        ____Graduate transfer

What is your scholarship status?

    ____I am on a full athletic scholarship

    ____I am on a partial athletic scholarship
    ____I do not receive an athletic scholarship

What best describes your playing status on your team

    ____I am a starter and play more than 50% of any game

    ____I am a starter and play less than 50% of any game

    ____I do not start, but I play more than 50% of any game

    ____I do not start, and I play less than 50% of any game

APPENDIX B.

INTERVIEW GUIDE

I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with me today about your experience as a Black male college football player. My name is Andy and I am a former college football player and currently training to become a sport psychologist. Both my personal and professional experiences have made me passionate about working with college athletes, specifically regarding their mental health, and has helped me understand the necessity of being an advocate for racial and social justice. With that being said, my main objective for this study is to gain insight regarding your experiences of racism within college football, specifically about your experiences related to race. In focusing on that, I want to learn more about how race-related experiences have affected your well-being, your performances, your relationships, how you have coped with these experiences, and maybe who has and has not supported you as you have gone through these experiences. Toward the end of the interview, I will give you the opportunity to share any ideas or suggestions you might have for how athletic departments in general, and football coaches and teams in particular, can create a more inclusive and racially just environment and better foster/support your well-being and success. Your identity will remain confidential throughout this entire process, by that I mean no one will know that you have participated in this study unless you choose to tell them. Over the next 60-90 minutes I want to create a space where we can have a real conversation about the very real race-related things that are happening in our country and very likely in your life. With all of this being said, I'm wondering how you're feeling right now about sharing your personal experiences with me or having this conversation with me, a white man (*allow time for natural conversation about how athlete is feeling about participating in this study*).

If, at any point during our interview, you feel uncomfortable about what we are talking about, please let me know and we will stop and talk about how you want to continue. As a

reminder, when you completed the consent form online you agreed to allow me to record our conversation so I can create a verbatim transcript of what you say. Once I transcribe the interview, I will delete the recording. I want to confirm that you still give me permission to record this interview. And as a reminder, you will also receive a $50 Amazon e-gift card for participating in the interview today, which I will send to the email of your choice after we're finished. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Great, let's get started.

I would love to start by having you tell me about how you got involved in football.

- What types of things do you enjoy about being a college football player?

- What goals do you have for yourself?

Alright, well thank you for telling me a little about yourself and your journey to get where you are today. Now, let's go ahead and move into the main purpose of the study and our interview about race in college football…

As a Black male college football player, have you ever been mistreated because of your race? Would you mind telling me about any specific situations or incidents that have occurred? *(this question will be posed multiple times to give the athlete the opportunity to express as many experiences as he would like to disclose moments in which he experienced unfair treatment because of his race)*

(Areas that will be inquired about during conversations regarding mistreatment)

- Impact on mental health

- Impact on performance (as an athlete and student)

- Impact on relationships (e.g., with teammates, coaches, friends)

- Ways athlete has coped

- Supportive and non-supportive people in his life (and racial background of these individuals)

- Other situations or incidents athlete has witnessed in which other Black male college football players were mistreated because of their race

Which of the incidents of mistreatment that you shared with me impacted you the most? What made that incident the most impactful for you?

What do you believe are important racial inequality or social justice issues that Black college football players face?

When you think about your team, your coaches, your athletic department, even the larger institution of college sports, what do you think needs to change to create a more socially and racially just and inclusive environment?

Alright, well thank you so much, this concludes our interview. Before we end, is there anything else related to what we've been talking about today or anything I have not asked you about that you would like to share? Also, do you know any other Black male college football players, like teammates or friends at other schools, who you think might be interested in participating in this study? If so, would you mind passing along my contact information to them and have them reach out to me so I can tell them more about the study and how they can participate? They can reach me by email at XXXX or by phone at XXX-XXX-XXXX. And again, to express my gratitude for participating in this study, I will send your $50 Amazon e-gift card to the email address that you prefer. Thank you again, I really appreciate you making the time for our discussion today and the authenticity and vulnerability that you showed in our conversation, and I wish you the best of luck with everything. Take care, goodbye.

APPENDIX C.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As college students, athletes will experience various general stressors during their tenure at their respective institutions, including managing academics, families, peer relationships, and finances (Anglin & Wade, 2007). In addition, college student athletes experience a range of unique stressors that, when combined with these general ones, can exacerbate psychological distress and other forms of dis-health (e.g., difficulty sleeping; AIR, 1989; Anglin & Wade, 2007; Beamon, 2014; Brooks & Althouse, 2013). For example, 95% and 86% of male and female college athletes, respectively, reported feeling stressed about tests, writing papers, missing classes because of travel, and making up missed assignments (Humphrey et al., 2000).

In addition to the stressors experienced by all college athletes, Black male athletes, particularly in revenue sports (i.e., basketball and football), are subjected to events and situations that are unique to their gender and race. For example, male athletes in the United States must navigate masculine expectations, norms, and values and be aware of how those may influence their daily behaviors (Foley, 2001; Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2012). Conforming to these masculine ideologies can lead to lower mental health help-seeking behavior (Addis & Mahalik, 2003) and more health risk behaviors (e.g., excessive alcohol consumption; Mahalik et al., 2007). As Black athletes, they may experience expectations regarding their worth and value being intimately tied to their sport performances, evident in the messages they receive beginning in their youth about the greater importance of athletic ability than academic ability (Beamon, 2008). Additionally, Black athletes may experience a lack of preparation for college courses, educational stereotypes from their professors, and a lack of African American representation in institutional leadership (Eitzen, 2000; Singer, 2005). Together, and once in college, Black male athletes are uniquely likely to experience racism and discrimination in the classroom, within their

respective sports, and across campus and the community (Beamon, 2014; Edwards, 2000; Melendez, 2008).

Although it is a truth that Black male collegiate athletes experience racism and discrimination (Beamon, 2014; Melendez, 2008), research examining how this racism may affect their well-being has been sparse. Some studies have examined Black male collegiate athletes' unique stressors (Eitzen, 2000; Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2012), experiences with institutional racism (Singer, 2005), and experiences with campus-based racism (Beamon, 2014), yet these studies have been limited. These studies either offer a glimpse into a narrow area of a student-athlete's experience (Eitzen, 2000; Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2012), use a small sample size (i.e., 4; Singer, 2005), or sample former athletes about their retrospective experiences (Beamon, 2014). Thus, research that seeks to understand and give voice to current Black male college athletes' lived experiences of racism and its effects on their psychological well-being is warranted. To provide a context for such research, I examine the historical and current context of racism in sport, particularly in college athletics.

Racism in Sport

Black athletes have faced prejudice, discrimination, ridicule, social isolation, and many other injustices since the 1800s when they were first allowed to participate in organized sports (Brooks & Althouse, 2013). Similar to the long historical delays in Black individuals being granted civil rights by the government, Black athletes endured long-standing processes, rules, and outright bans that denied them the opportunities to participate in sports that were organized, and sanctioned, by external entities (e.g., Major League Baseball [MLB], National Collegiate Athletic Association [NCAA]). For example, even after the US Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954 that segregated schools were not legal, the NCAA did not accept

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) as member institutions until 1965 (Brooks & Althouse, 2013). Additionally, even when teams, leagues and institutions allowed more Black players to play in the late 1960s and 1970s, the motivations were not based in morality or altruism, but rather reflected a pragmatic evaluation that Black athletes could help teams win and increase revenue (Hodge, Harrison, Burden, & Dixson, 2008). Even when athletes were allowed to participate in their sports, they experienced the ongoing indignity of not being allowed to dine in certain restaurants or stay in certain hotels when traveling with their teams due to societal racism and discrimination (Brooks & Althouse, 2013).

Within the collegiate sport environment, Black athletes historically have been subjected to racial slurs from other students on campuses, not allowed to live on campuses, excluded from social activities, targeted for physical and verbal abuse by other players and coaches, and neglected academically (Beamon, 2014; Brooks & Althouse, 2013). Brooks and Althouse (2013) further described the mistreatment Black college athletes experienced at certain universities, such as when schools refused to play against teams that were integrated and had Black players. As a result of this refusal, coaches established a widespread "gentleman's agreement" in which coaches would withhold Black players from playing in such situations, depriving them of opportunities to participate fully on their teams. Black athletes also have been kicked off of teams for missing a practice, and been subjected to rule changes in some sports (e.g., dunking made illegal in basketball) that some believe were instituted as a result of Black athletes embarrassing white athletes with their more developed skills. During the 1920s and 1930s, the development of HBCUs and others Black sports leagues provided Black athletes with an outlet for their talents and an environment in which to perform without fear of violence or acts of racism from white individuals (Brooks & Althouse, 2013). Also within Black communities,

sports became a powerful medium through which athletes spoke out against racial injustice and exposed racially-based discrimination in society. In 2020, Black athletes across many leagues have continued to use their position in sport as a platform to advocate for social justice. For example, Layshia Clarendon and Breanna Stewart are two players among many who explicitly spoke out regarding racial and social justice prior to the season opener for the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), which dedicated its entire season to Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old Black woman who was shot by the police at least six times in her sleep during a "no knock" warrant (Asmelash, 2020). Additionally, Chuba Hubbard, a prominent running back for the Oklahoma State University football team, threatened to boycott the upcoming season if he did not see an effort from his university and coaching staff to better support and advocate for racial justice (Horn, 2020).

Many of the racial inequalities and personal indignities suffered by Black athletes in the 1900s and through the civil rights era persist into contemporary sport and its institutions. In collegiate sport, these problems may be particularly salient for the Black athletes who play at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Martin (1993) found that the first African American athletes to be admitted into a PWI in the mid-1900s needed to demonstrate elite athletic prowess, strong academic ability, and good character, as well as the mental toughness that would allow them to withstand the discrimination and racism that were endemic to the institutions. As Black athletes' centrality in developing winning programs has evolved and Black athletes have become more heavily recruited by PWIs, many Black athletes have felt exploited by these institutions (Brooks & Althouse, 2013). For example, these athletes felt that they were neither encouraged or supported academically, nor were they treated as socially equal to their white student peers. Black athletes also reported feeling undervalued by society in general and by their respective

institutions, especially when they no longer were athletically eligible (Steinfeldt et al., 2010). These athletes' acknowledgements supported the idea that Black athletes are valued for their athletic prowess alone. Research continues to illuminate ongoing examples of the racism and exploitation experienced by Black athletes, including intolerance from the community, rejection from white teammates and peers, and double standards and unfair applications of team rules (Edwards, 2000; Hall, 2001; Melendez, 2008). By talking with Black athletes and listening to their stories, researchers can continue to give voice to their lived experiences of racism and to illuminate the ongoing racial indignities that they experience within collegiate sport.

One aspect of a student's college experience that can help ease the existence of the experienced racism and discrimination is that student's sense of belonging and social support on campus. However, African American college students often express feelings of mistrust, persecution, and paranoia within PWIs (Melendez, 2008). This lack of connection for African American students is exacerbated by the glaring lack of representation of African American faculty and leaders at universities (Edwards, 2000; Hall, 2001; Melendez, 2008). In college sports, specifically, this leadership gap is evident in the unequal percentages of athletic department administration positions and head coach positions, particularly in football, held by African Americans (Forde, 2007, NCAA, 2010). For example, the percentages of African American administrators and coaches at non-HBCU Division I universities remained virtually the same over an approximately 15-year span (NCAA, 2010). In 1995-1996, Black individuals constituted 2.7% of Directors of Athletics, 5.9%, of Associate Directors of Athletics, 6.7% of Assistant Directors of Athletics, 18% of Academic Advisors, and 8% of head coaches in men's football and basketball, compared to 3.9%, 7.6%, 7.4%, 17.3%, and 9.4%, respectively, in 2009-2010. In another study, out of the 117 Division I Football Bowl Series (FBS) football programs,

50% of the players identified as African American, yet only 6% of head coaches identified the same (Walker, 2005). Similarly, Lapchick (2012) found that 90% of campus leadership, athletic directors, and faculty athletic representatives at these 117 FBS institutions identified as white. This vast underrepresentation of African American coaches and other leadership positions in athletics is so glaring that some have considered filing Title VII lawsuits (an amendment under the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national religion; Associated Press, 2007). Black college athletes do not see other African Americans assuming leadership positions on their campuses or within their respective teams, perpetuating the message that their primary (sole) value is as athletes in their sports.

Another prominent area in which Black college athletes experience racism and discrimination is within academics (Hawkins, 2010). AIR (1989) showed that Black student-athletes were less prepared academically for higher education compared to their white peers. For example, 58% and 61% of the Black football and basketball student-athletes scored in the lowest quartile on the SAT or in their high school grade-point averages, respectively. Yet, the measures of cognitive factors (e.g., ACT, SAT, and GPA) that have been used to illustrate the underpreparedness of Black athletes may in themselves be examples of systemic racism. Hyatt (2003) found that studies have traditionally focused on academic success and persistence measured by cognitive factors. Yet, these measures tended to correlate with persistence among white, but not non-white, college students. Although blatant bigotry has been mostly eradicated in institutional policy since the beginning of the 21st century, Black athletes' poor performances and lack of readiness for the academic rigors of college can be attributed to covert discrimination, such as lack of encouragement and support for academic success (Brooks &

Althouse, 2013). Thus, Black college student athletes' academic development and opportunities may be undermined even before they stop foot on to their respective campuses.

Beamon (2008) claimed that Black student-athletes' poor academic performance was deeply rooted in messages that they receive from a young age that their value is based in their athletic, not their intellectual, ability. These messages cause many Black athletes to dedicate more time to developing their athletic skills and performances and to put minimal efforts into their academics. Additionally, these messages communicate stereotypes that Black individuals do not have the same intellectual aptitude as their white peers, instilling low expectations regarding their own academic capabilities (Harrison & Boyd, 2007; Hodge et al., 2008a). African American students also historically have attended underfunded schools prior to college, which do not have the resources to adequately prepare them for higher education (Brooks & Althouse, 2013). This inequity, when combined with university eligibility standards and qualification requirements for athletic scholarships, is an example of institutional racism that disproportionately affects Black college student-athletes. Furthermore, despite efforts by the NCAA to hold colleges and universities accountable for helping athletes succeed academically, some institutions still see as high as a 32% discrepancy in graduation rates between Black and white student-athletes (Lapchick, 2011). Thus, through systemic and racist messages about their intellectual capabilities, African American individuals are taught to pursue athletic success while undervaluing (and under-pursuing) their education.

This racism and discrimination extends into the classroom, as well for Black collegiate athletes. Anglin and Wade (2007) surveyed 141 Black college students at PWIs to examine their experiences on campus and adjustment to college. They found that Black students were more likely than white students to feel discriminated against, experience prejudice from faculty and

staff, and experience negative in-class academic interactions or events. Similarly, Simons et al. (2007) compared the classroom experiences of Black and white athletes, finding that 29% of the African American student-athletes reported being suspected of cheating on assignments compared to just 6% of their white counterparts. Engstrom et al. (1995) supported these findings in a survey of 128 faculty members, 91% of whom were white. They found that the faculty held prejudicial attitudes toward student-athletes in their classes. For example, faculty members assumed that African American athletes, particularly those in revenue-sports (i.e., football and basketball), were accepted to their respective institutions under special circumstances because of their athletic ability rather than adequate academic performance. Beamon (2014) interviewed 20 Black male former Division I college athletes about their experiences of racism and stereotyping while they were students on their campuses. She found that several of the athletes perceived the classroom as a racially hostile environment because of how they were treated by professors. Ultimately, compounding upon the adversity Black athletes must overcome prior to college, they subsequently are faced with the racism and prejudicial beliefs prevalent within the university classroom.

In addition to classroom settings, the Black college athletes in Beamon's (2014) study identified many other instances of campus racism. These athletes described enduring face-to-face name calling and racial slurs from peers across campus. Additionally, they experienced racism from fans during competitions, such as having racial slurs and epithets said toward them. When walking across campuses, they revealed how women would clutch their purses and walk in opposite directions than the athletes. For some of these athletes, the first time they heard racial slurs was within the realm of college athletics. The majority of the interviewed athletes (90%)

believed that racism was engrained in their campuses and college towns and was an unfortunate part of their everyday life.

A popularly held perception is that the status associated with being an athlete serves as a protective factor against racism and that sports are a means of social mobility and financial and career success for young Black men. However, research does not support these beliefs (Hawkins, 1999). Hawkins (1999) analyzed data from a previous study (AIR, 1989) that examined Black student athletes' enrollment status, academic preparedness, families' socioeconomic status, and perceived psychological and emotional well-being. Hawkins (1999)'s findings compared African American college student-athletes to migrant workers due to the similarities in experiences with institutional powerlessness, necessary relocation to capitalize on skills, and the palpable labor exploitation visible in the minimal cost of labor production and massive profits collected by the owner or overseer as opposed to the laborer. This type of exploitation was identified in the 1980s when Edwards (1984) described how African American college athletes are deliberately and systematically exploited for their athletic skills and talent, sold a narrative that promises them success and social mobility, and uses them for profit beginning in elementary school and extending through high school and further.

Previous legal cases (e.g., *Taylor v. Wake Forest University*, 1972; *Ross v. Creighton University*, 1990) have demonstrated that PWIs have benefited from the exploitation of their college athletes. Both *Taylor v. Wake Forest University* (1972) and *Ross v. Creighton University* (1990) demonstrated how Black male college student athletes' sport contributions to their universities were prioritized at the expense of their academics and overall well-being (Cooper, 2016). Thus, the institutions maintained their economic and dominant racial ideologies while impeding their athletes' holistic development. Donnor (2005) argued that the continued

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exploitation of Black male college athletes demonstrates and reflects the pervasive and systemic inequalities in U.S. cultural ideologies. This exploitation is a distinct example of the institutional racism that perpetually devalues Black students' culture and holistic development while celebrating and privileging whiteness. Ultimately, Black collegiate student-athletes are not recruited for academic or educational purposes; they are recruited to these institutions to provide athletic labor to generate revenue, enhance visibility, and enrich the reputation of the PWIs they serve (Cooper, 2016).

The aforementioned research (Beamon, 2014; Cooper, 2016; Feagin & Feagin, 2012) indicates that African American athletes experience both individual (i.e., face-to-face, hostile acts of a person toward a racial group) and institutional (i.e., systemic, cumulative, and covert acts ingrained into the everyday practices of institutions that negatively affect subordinate groups) racism. This experienced racism is present in every facet of an African American student-athlete's college experience from inauguration to commencement, yet still goes unseen and invalidated by peers, administration, and the general population. This lack of awareness can be explained by a colorblind ideology that facilitates individuals' inability to perceive racism or discrimination as a contributing factor to various inequalities (Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Shaw, 2017). Because most white individuals endorse colorblindness to preserve their white privilege, the real and detrimental racist experiences of Black student-athletes go invalidated and unaddressed (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). Further, Bonilla-Silva (2017) emphasized that the minimization of racism denigrates the experiences of individuals of color, which pushes the notion that discrimination no longer impacts African Americans' chances and opportunities in society and that the apparent inequalities must be linked to some other facet attributable to African Americans. Bonilla-Silva's (2017) and Shaw's (2017) research sheds light on how colorblindness supports white privilege

ideology, perpetuates whiteness as dominant, and reinforces the idea that the plight of African Americans in today's society is their own responsibility.

Across the history of sport, Black male athletes, including those participating at the college level, have endured racism and discrimination. They were excluded, isolated, and oppressed when they were integrated into PWIs in the 1950s and 1960s (Brooks & Althouse, 2013) and continue to experience both overt and covert racism to this day (Beamon, 2014; Cooper, 2016). They have been socialized to value their athletic prowess over their intellect such that their academic pursuits often are belittled or unsupported (Beamon, 2008; Brooks & Althouse, 2013). This socialization marginalizes the capabilities of Black adolescents and allows PWIs to exploit them during the recruitment process for their sports and once they are admitted and become "student-athletes" (Brooks & Althouse, 2013; Cooper, 2016). Researchers have suggested that PWIs exploit Black college athletes for their athletic labor to the financial benefit of the institution (Cooper, 2016), disregard the athletes once they have exhausted their athletic eligibility, and thus utility to the institution (Steinfeldt et al., 2016), and underrepresent African Americans in leadership positions (e.g., coaches), thus failing to provide supportive role models for these athletes (NCAA, 2010). While on campus, Black athletes will experience racism in their interactions with faculty, peers, coaches, and even the community who cheers them on from the stands (Beamon, 2014). The tragic lack of awareness and denial of all of these realities by leaders at PWIs is detrimental to Black male college athletes and perpetuated by colorblind ideologies (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). With the prevalence of racism and discrimination in college sports, and the general failure to acknowledge its existence, researchers need to give Black male college student-athletes a mechanism through which they can share their lived experiences and

how they have been affected. Critical race theory (CRT) provides a conceptual framework for such research.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT; Delgado, 1995) was conceived as a movement in law by Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado in the mid-1970s due to their dissatisfaction with the pace and success of the Civil Rights Movement and racial reform in the United States (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Delgado and Stefancic (2001) described how CRT began as a movement through which activists and scholars sought to transform the relationship between race, racism, and power. These scholars noticed that racism was so deeply embedded within American culture even the law that was supposed to sustain racial equality perpetuated racial stratification. Bell, Freeman, and Delgado also pulled from other movements (e.g., critical legal studies, radical feminism) in creating CRT to emphasize the relationship between power and the construction of social roles, as well as the embedded and invisible patterns that uphold white male dominant culture (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). This conceptualization resonated with other professionals who have incorporated CRT into their work to better understand the dynamics of race and racism within their respective fields (e.g., academics, political science, athletics; Beamon, 2014; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

CRT's framework is comprised of 5 basic tenets: 1) permanence of racism, 2) interest convergence, 3) social construction, 4) differential racialization, and 5) storytelling (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Permanence of Racism

Through CRT, racism is conceptualized as an ingrained part of American society that provides advantages for white people over people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Hiraldo,

2010). Racism is systemic and is embedded in the political, social, and economic facets of United States society (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004) and could even be considered the "usual way of society" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7). For example, the fact that mortgage redlining or overlooking a Black graduate with a Ph.D. for a white high school dropout can go unchallenged and be widely accepted demonstrates the colorblindness our society maintains regarding the discrimination and marginalization of people of color.

Interest Convergence

White individuals have often benefitted from civil rights legislation that was developed to assist people of color (e.g., white women benefitting more from Affirmative Action than people of color; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1998; McCoy 2006). Additionally, civil rights legislation that was proposed as the means to provide equal opportunity to people of color (e.g., *Brown v. Board of Education*) actually may be a product of elite whites' self-interest rather than a moral duty to support and protect the rights of African Americans (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Ultimately, because racial oppression benefits many elite and working-class white individuals, a large portion of society has little incentive to eradicate it.

Social Construction

The idea of social construction explains that race is not a biological or genetic trait but rather one that is socially constructed (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). From this perspective, society can manipulate and determine the meaning of race in whichever way is most convenient and valuable to society, or the dominant members of it. Differences in physical traits (e.g., skin color, hair texture) pale in comparison to the shared commonalities between races and have no impact on higher-order traits like personality, intelligence, or moral behavior. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) explained that the fact that society can ignore this scientific evidence, construct

the idea of race, and subsequently attribute permanent and dispositional attributes to race is a foundational conception within CRT.

Differential Racialization

Delgado and Stefancic (2001) discussed a relatively new development in CRT, a tenet that describes how the dominant culture can prescribe different meanings to different races when it is most useful for their agenda. For example, when the labor market shifts, the racialization and depiction of minority groups changes along with it. African Americans were oppressed and deemed as inferior beings during slavery to justify the horrific conditions and treatment they endured. During another time period in American history, when African Americans were considered less useful to the labor force, Mexican and Japanese workers were exploited to maintain agricultural labor. The images of minority groups also are depicted differently depending on the messages the dominant culture wants to convey. Sometimes, members of a minority group are depicted as care-free and eager to serve white folks, whereas when conditions change they appear threatening, brutish, and menacing to represent savagery.

Storytelling

Storytelling involves the personal narratives of people of color that expose the dominant ideologies that perpetuate racism and historical oppression of people of color (DeCuir & Dixson, 2007; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). These stories legitimize and validate the real experiences of marginalized groups, such as how they are harmed by systemic racism and colorblindness, and provide a context through which these individuals' voices can be heard (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Parker & Villalpando, 2007). For example, through sharing their testimonies, individuals of marginalized groups can communicate the oppression, degradation, and racism they perpetually endure and of which their white peers may not be aware. In other

words, "minority status…brings with it a presumed competence to speak about race and racism" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 9).

CRT is a paradigm that has provided the foundational perspectives that are used to study race across a range of disciplines (e.g., political science, critical feminist theory) and extensively within psychological research. Researchers argue that racism is not a series of isolated events but rather engrained in the foundation of all institutions within American society (Donnor, 2005; Hiraldo, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Hiraldo (2010) analyzed diversity and inclusivity through a CRT lens to expose and challenge the maintenance of white supremacy in higher education. Bimper (2015) and Beamon (2014) used a CRT framework as the foundation of examining race within college athletics. Bimper (2015) sought to further understand the colorblindness threaded throughout universities that impacted the experiences of Black college student-athletes. Similarly, Beamon (2014) implemented a CRT framework in her research with Black male college athletes, particularly using the tenets of the permanence of racism and storytelling. Bimper (2015) and Beamon (2014) both provided examples for the appropriateness and importance of applying a CRT framework when examining the experiences of racism within college athletics. CRT highlights the necessity of amplifying the voices of Black student-athletes who are exploited by institutions embedded with ideas and practices that maintain white dominant culture, and who operate with a colorblind ideology that allows these institutions to ignore the harm being done to their own student-athletes. CRT will provide the framework for my investigation into the experiences of Black male collegiate athletes.

Effects of Racism on Well-Being

Experiencing chronic racism and discrimination has detrimental effects on the well-being of Black college athletes, particularly pertaining to their academic, social, and psychological

development (Beamon, 2014; Lapchick, 2010; Steinfeldt et al., 2010). Adjusting to college is a daunting task for any incoming student, and Black student-athletes are particularly at risk of experiencing greater hardship due to racial inequality and discrimination (Anglin & Wade, 2007; Hyatt, 2003; Steinfeldt et al., 2010). For example, Anglin and Wade's (2007) study assessed 141 Black students' adjustment to college at PWIs and racially diverse colleges. They found that Black students were more likely to experience poor adjustment if they endorsed racial stereotypes about their own racial group (e.g., lower intellectual aptitude than white peers). Black students may find it difficult to feel competent and confident around their white peers when faced with stereotypes that perpetuate negative ideas about African Americans. Steinfeldt et al. (2010) found that the challenges that Black college athletes face in adjusting to college is not isolated to PWIs. In their study, they assessed the athletic identity and racial identity among Black college football players who were attending NCAA Division 1-Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) and Division II schools, including both HBCUs and PWIs. They found that the athletes who were attending PWIs reported adjusting to college as well as their peers at HBCUs. However, regardless of the type of institution attended, the football players scored at the 35th percentile in both their Social Adjustment and their Institutional Attachment. Their findings indicate that, Black student-athletes are adjusting to college similarly at PWIs and HBCUs, their adjustment socially and within their institutions were poorer than students in general.

Hyatt (2003) conducted a study with African American college athletes that examined barriers they experience regarding persistence while adjusting to college. In this study, she found that one of these barriers is issues related to commitment. For example, her findings suggest that the athletic commitment of many high-level student-athletes often engulfs and transcends their commitments in other areas (e.g., academic, social, institutional, athletic). Institutional

commitment can help students become engaged across campus, thus enhancing their social and academic commitment, as well as others. However, if a student-athlete over-commits to athletics, they will have less time to dedicate toward other aspects of their college experience. Another study found that commitment to athletics can involve as much as 40 hours per week, including lifting weights, watching film, practicing, studying game plans, and engaging in a plethora of sport-related activities (Simons et al., 2007). This amount of commitment innately requires a disproportionate amount of dedication to athletics that inevitably pulls from, and leaves little time for, other responsibilities and roles on campus.

The combination of many detrimental components of a Black college student-athlete's college experience (e.g., racism and prejudice in the classroom, significant difficulty in college adjustment, excess commitment to athletics) also has led to vast discrepancies in graduation rates among college students (*The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education,* 2012). African American male college students, and athletes in particular, are considered to be one of the most at-risk populations in college due to their markedly low graduation rate when compared to members of other demographics (Lapchick, 2010). Even though only 4% of the student population on Division I campuses are African American, research shows as much as 61% of men's basketball players and 46% of all football players are African American (Harper et al., 2013; Lapchick, 2010). In 2013, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) released graduation rates for their athletes and found that 82% of athletes earn a degree, but rates varied by race and gender. Overall, Black athletes were graduating at a much lower rate (67%) than their white counterparts (86%). Specifically, Black male student-athletes' graduation rates (62%) were significantly lower than Black female athletes (78%), white male athletes (82%), and white female athletes (91%; NCAA 2013). Other research has investigated differences in graduation

rates at specific schools based on race and found a vast discrepancy in graduation rates between

Black and white student-athletes (32%), with some schools graduating as few as 25% of their

Black athletes but as many as 100% of their white athletes (Lapchick, 2011). This research

highlights the drastic failure of institutions to develop their Black student-athletes holistically

and encourage academic success. Thus, institutions need to understand the unique stressors and

their effects on the African American male student-athlete in order to foster the *student* as much

as the *athlete* and help address the issue of vastly lower graduation rates compared to their peers.

In addition to the negative impact on Black college student-athletes' academic

development, the racism and discrimination these athletes experience on campus have harmful

effects on their social and psychological well-being, as well. The distress that Black college

student-athletes experience is exacerbated particularly at PWIs, something researchers have seen

for decades (AIR, 1989; Melendez, 2008). Attending a PWI as a Black student-athlete can have a

negative impact on that student's self-concept (Brown, 2001) and cause Black students to spend

their cognitive and affective resources dedicated to assimilation and social expectations while

their peers can allocate their resources elsewhere (Steinfeldt et al., 2010). For example, African

American college students-athletes are forced to navigate prejudicial beliefs and attitudes, as

well as overt racism and discrimination, from faculty and peers across campus (Beamon, 2014).

These Black student-athletes are required to expend energy in finding adaptive ways to not

confirm stereotypes or respond to racism in ways that will be harmful to their overall well-being

or academic development (e.g., victim of violence, receive grade deductions, disciplined

unfairly). White students are not faced with the realities that Black student-athletes endure, thus

allowing them to dedicate their cognitive and affective energy to other areas (e.g., academics,

social life). Similarly, athletic teams often require Black athletes to conform to what is deemed a

part of the "team culture" but can be perceived as a part of the white dominant culture. For example, during a recent external review at the University of Iowa for accusations regarding racial discrimination, athlete interviews revealed that the football program has historically adhered to a culture called the "Iowa Way." Many Black players expressed difficulty adjusting to the program's culture, explaining that they felt like they could not be themselves or display their true personality by having to subscribe to a certain look that appeared to be built around the stereotype of a clean-cut, white Midwestern athlete. Specifically, "numerous rules, both formal and perceived, requiring conformity around hair, clothing, jewelry, and tattoos left many Black players feeling isolated, targeted, and unwelcome in the program" (Husch Blackwell, 2020, p. 2).

Black student athletes at PWIs are likely to experience racial isolation and discrimination, as well as difficulty talking to and connecting with coaches, teachers, and peers (AIR, 1989; Beamon, 2014; Melendez, 2008; Sadberry & Mobley, 2013). The aforementioned review of the University of Iowa football team culture highlighted some athletes feeling isolated and believing they were treated differently than white teammates (Husch Blackwell, 2020). For example, numerous players indicated that hairstyles traditionally associated with Black culture were not allowed. Moreover, players believed certain rules were unfair and racially motivated (e.g., white players could wear hats but Black players could not wear do-rags). One former player said that country music was played "all of the time" rather than music that Black players preferred, resulting in some of the Black players feeling isolated (Husch Blackwell, 2020, p. 11).

In Melendez's (2008) study, he also found that Black college football players at PWIs felt isolated, rejected, unfairly judged by their coaches and community, and mistrustful of their peers. The six Black college football players interviewed by Melendez (2008) discussed in-depth their experiences of attending a PWI, much of which was described as inhospitable and unsupportive.

As a result of the isolation, several of the athletes described feeling lost and unsure of on whom they could rely. Beamon (2014) found that African American student-athletes even feel isolated from other African American students on campus. Of the 20 athletes that Beamon (2014) interviewed, two spoke to feeling pressure from their coaches and teams not to protest or attend demonstrations to denounce racism when major racial conflicts occurred on their respective campuses. The athletes said that this inability to advocate for racial justice was immensely distressing to them and put them in the position of being separated out from their African American peers, even making some feel like a "sell out" (p. 129). Both Melendez (2008) and Beamon (2014) found that this isolation extended to the city in which the athletes attended college. These Black male college athletes described feeling like they were not welcome nor wanted within the larger community. Some of the athletes expressed regret about choosing their respective institutions because of this isolation, demonstrating the extent of the negative impact it had on these individuals.

In a related study, Jackson et al. (2002) examined the racial attitudes and aggression in first-year Black and white male and female college athletes. They surveyed 533 of these athletes and found that Black athletes, football players in particular, did not want to be perceived negatively or as aggressive for fear of repercussions from campus administration, similarly to the athletes in Beamon's (2014) study regarding the internalized pressure from the coaches. Jackson et al.'s (2002) athletes likely held this fear because of the perception that coaches and administration intentionally downplayed the diversity and racial differences within their respective teams in order to maintain focus on team cohesion and winning. However, Beamon's (2014) results indicate that Black male college athletes do not overlook the racial differences on their teams. Popular culture supports the idea that sport is an avenue through which racial lines

are crossed and groups can be brought together. However, over half (55%) of the Black male college athletes in Beamon's (2014) study reported a racial divide on their team, and 75% of the athletics disagreed with the concept of sports bringing racial harmony. Beamon's (2014) and Jackson et al.'s (2002) results suggest that isolation and exclusion not only are felt by Black college athletes, but often dismissed by the leaders in their everyday lives. Cooper and Hawkins (2014) underscored the importance of these findings through their study of Black college athletes who had transferred from PWIs to HBCUs. These authors found that many of these athletes transferred because of their feelings of exclusion or being an outcast on campus. For example, some athletes described existing only as "the basketball team" regardless of where they went on campus (p. 95). Thus, not addressing the negative social implications of experienced racism and discrimination can result in Black college athletes leaving their respective institutions.

Sadberry & Mobley (2013) found that the numerous responsibilities (e.g., pressures and demands of athletics, constant balancing of many roles, pressure to grow up quickly and make difficult life decisions) and the identities (e.g., athlete, student, man) that student-athletes are required to hold may contribute to high-risk maladaptive coping behaviors, including excessive drinking and engaging in casual sexual experiences. Additionally, these authors found that many of the aforementioned effects of racism and discrimination (e.g., lack of trust in others, feelings of isolation, significant struggle to adjust to college) and certainly the racism itself are likely to produce anxiety and depressive symptoms, as well as interpersonal and family problems. These myriad research studies' results indicate that Black college athletes endure a great deal of harmful treatment throughout their time on campus, and often enter college at high risk for negative mental health outcomes, such as anxiety, depression, and attempted suicides (United States Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Mental Health, 2016).

Ultimately, Black male college student-athletes' well-being is greatly affected by the racism and racial inequities that are embedded within intercollegiate athletics, yet these institutions remain unaware of said racism and its detrimental impact (Bimper, 2015). This author used CRT as a framework to examine colorblind ideologies in the intercollegiate athletic system and found that sport operates behind colorblind racism, pushing forward post-racial narratives and artificial accounts that subtly and covertly impact the student-athletes' experiences and development. Revenue-driving sports portray a narrative of post-racial discourse, yet further affirm the continued presence of racism and prejudice in sport. For example, he found that African American student-athletes support the ideals of equal opportunity and overtly express the apparent underrepresentation of students and faculty of color across campus. Yet, many of the institutions that perpetuate this underrepresentation deny overt or intentional racism, rather providing the distorted rationale that individuals of color lack the experience, reliability, or intellect necessary for leadership positions. Thus, these vivid examples of colorblindness exemplify the obligation that institutions have to own their role in perpetuating racism and its detrimental effects on Black college athletes' well-being.

Coping with Racism in Sport

In the discussion of the effects of racism and discrimination on Black college student-athletes' well-being, researchers also have explored how they cope with these experiences. Coping is defined as "the person's conscious attempt at reducing or managing the demands of a stressful event or expanding the person's resources to deal with it" (Anshel et al., 2001, p. 229). In conceptualizing coping, researchers also have suggested that personal (e.g., cognitive appraisal of the event) and situational (e.g., family socioeconomic status [SES], characteristics of the sport contest) factors impact the coping process (Hoar et al., 2006; Richards, 2004). For

example, Skein et al. (2018) found that adolescent athletes tended to implement a wide range of coping skills (e.g., talking to family and friends, seeking help from a coach, mentor or teacher) to combat various stressors as their school year progressed. Their research also described how time spent engaging in these strategies and which coping strategies the athletes chose depended on time of year and whether or not they were in-season for their sport. In support, Anshel et al. (2001) found that athletes' coping strategies were intentional and consciously implemented rather than engaged in automatically. Furthermore, Anshel et al. (2010) described coping behaviors as dispositional, meaning the coping strategies athletes choose to use are going to be dependent on their personality characteristics, the emotional state they are in when experiencing the stressor, and the context and details of the stressful event itself. Collectively, this research (Anshel et al., 2001; 2010; Skein et al., 2018) suggests that coping styles are variable and multiple factors can impact their use.

Researchers have suggested that coping strategies and preferences may vary by gender (Anshel et al., 2010; Hammermeister & Burton, 2004; Nicholls et al., 2007). Across several studies, researchers found that male, compared to female, athletes were less likely to seek out social support in their coping (Crocker & Graham, 1995) and more likely to use problem-focused, rather than emotion-focused, coping strategies (Hammermeister & Burton, 2004; Madden et al., 1989). For example, Hammermeister and Burton (2004) investigated the differences in appraisal of and coping with stressful events among over 300 endurance sport athletes. They found that male athletes tended to perceive more control over environmental influences than female athletes. Additionally, male athletes reported lower use of instrumental coping and venting emotions compared to female athletes. Hammermeister and Burton (2004) conceptualized these findings by explaining how men typically are socialized to implement more

problem-solving approaches to coping. Yet, in a separate study of various undergraduate athletes (e.g., university, club), Nicholls et al. (2007) found that female athletes used problem-focused coping strategies (e.g., planning, communication, technique-oriented coping) more frequently than did the male athletes in their sample. They suggested that gender differences may be limited to one or two coping categories within problem- and emotion-focused coping dimensions, rather than between the two domains in general. Additionally, Nicholls et al. (2007) explained that the gender differences they found could have been due to their study's methodology. Specifically, they used concept maps, structures that allow athletes to enter their own data regarding certain concepts (e.g., stressors, coping skills), which allowed for free responses. Anshel et al. (2010) found that both male and female athletes preferred avoidance coping styles (e.g., ignoring or blocking out the problem) following an intense stressor, but female athletes engaged in this coping more frequently than male athletes. The results from these studies (Anshel et al., 2010; Hammermeister et al., 2004; Nicholls et al., 2007) suggest that there are gender differences between male and female athletes in how they engage in coping and on what type of coping they tend to rely. Racial socialization, which describes the process by which a Black individual develops a healthy Black identity (Stevenson, 1995), is one coping strategy that African American individuals have found helpful. Anglin and Wade (2007) found racial socialization to potentially alleviate some of the deeper and more significant consequences of racism and discrimination that African American youth will experience later in life. Specifically, they found that, in later life, African Americans have more protective and adaptive responses to racism, as well as a stronger sense of identity, if they have been prepared in childhood in how to experience and handle them. Participating in athletics also provides an example of early adaptive coping in Black youth, but especially when that sport participation is with other Black individuals (Brooks

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& Althouse, 2013). This form of adaptive coping is represented through the establishment of HBCUs (Miller, 1995). HBCUs allowed African American male athletes to freely compete in athletics and provided them with the unique opportunity to demonstrate aggression and strength, which were considered dangerous and life-threatening characteristics in the company of white individuals in the 1920s and 1930s when the HBCUs came into existence. These athletes were able to embrace their authentic, unfiltered selves and exude power and strength, rather than be passive and deferential toward white people (Brooks & Althouse, 2013).

Researchers also have found that coping styles and approaches may differ depending on race (e.g., Anshel et al., 2010). Both Black and white athletes prefer avoidance coping, or the "conscious attempt at physically or mentally turning away from the stressful source" (Anshel et al., 2010, p. 230), over approach coping, "the intensified intake and processing of unpleasant or threatening information" (p. 230), but Black athletes preferred avoidance coping strategies to a greater extent than white athletes. For example, they were more likely than white athletes to engage in religious coping, which is considered an avoidant coping strategy because the individual is mentally focusing on something other than the stressful event (Anshel et al., 2010). This finding can be explained by previous research that exhibits religious coping historically as a highly central component within the Black community as a whole (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Mendez et al., 2018; Park et al., 2018). Specifically looking at religious coping, Park et al. (2018) measured the differences between the effects of positive (e.g., confident and trusting relationship with God and seeking religious support) and negative (a less secure relationship with God and more punitive appraisals of the church) religious coping within an African American community. These researchers found that positive religious coping positively predicted the well-being of these individuals more than two years later, whereas negative religious coping strongly

predicted negative aspects of well-being (e.g., depressive symptoms, anxiety, negative affect) more than two years later. Mendez et al. (2018) found similarly positive effects of coping on the physical health of African Americans through a longitudinal church-based intervention. They examined active coping, or "the process by which people manage stress by taking active steps to try to remove or overcome the stressors in their lives or to modify the effects of stress" (p. 345), with an older African American sample (i.e., stratified groups 45-64 and 65 and older) through an 18-month community- and church-based program designed to improve physical health. Over the 18 months, the participants who engaged in active coping noticed beneficial effects on both physical and mental variables (i.e., weight variables, life satisfaction). The findings from these studies (Mendez et al., 2018; Park et al., 2018) suggest that coping and social support can be particularly helpful to both mental and physical health within the African American population.

Further investigating African Americans' coping behaviors, Utsey et al. (2000) sampled 213 African American men and women to study their learned coping strategies, life satisfaction, and self-esteem in the context of chronic racism. Overall, they found that seeking social support and cultural racism (i.e., "when the cultural practices of the 'dominant' group are generally regarded by society and its institutions as being superior to the culture of a 'subordinate' group," p. 72) both were significant predictors of race-related stress. More specifically, African American women sought social support significantly more often than African American men. These findings suggest that African American individuals prefer to tell others (i.e., seek social support) when experiencing racism and discrimination, particularly when the racism may be subtle and less tangible (e.g., cultural racism) and seeking support may be the only viable option (Jones, 1995). Because this more insidious racism is engrained in American culture, other coping strategies (e.g., problem solving) may be less practical to use.

Although researchers have examined how African Americans tend to cope (Anshel et al., 2001; Mendez et al., 2018; Park et al., 2018; Utsey et al., 2000), fewer studies have focused specifically on the coping experiences and approaches of Black male collegiate athletes (Brooks & Althouse, 2013; Miller, 1995). Because Black college athletes often feel isolated on their campus, particularly from the community, faculty, coaches, and peers (Beamon, 2014; Melendez, 2008), it may be difficult for them to reach out for support, particularly when these other individuals are the ones who are perpetuating the racism and discrimination that is causing the athletes to seek support in the first place. Further, male athletes are more likely to engage in avoidant coping than female athletes (Anshel et al., 2010), making it less likely that Black college male athletes would engage in dialogue with others regarding their stressors. Thus, the seeming lack of support internalized by Black college male athletes on their campuses and the tendency to engage in other tasks to avoid focusing on stressors may hinder them from seeking social support, one of the most used and adaptive coping strategies in the African American community (Utsey et al., 2000).

Social support has been described as "the existence or availability of people on whom we can rely, people who let us know that they care about, value, and love us" (Sarason et al., 1983, p. 127). Research suggests that it may be difficult for Black male college students to find these types of people on their campuses for support (AIR, 1989; Beamon, 2014; Hawkins, 2010). For example, Hawkins (2010) highlighted the negative impact that college adjustment had on Black student-athletes' well-being and suggested that the change in social surroundings can be particularly jarring, especially for Black college athletes at PWIs where there are often simply few people who look like them and understand their lives. However, recent research suggests that there may be positive aspects of attending a PWI for African American students (Willis &

Neblett, 2019). In a study examining a sample of 171 Black college students, Willis and Neblett (2019) found that these students' racial identities change over time as they navigate attending PWIs and are exposed to new experiences (e.g., membership within Black student unions or organizations). Through these experiences, these students may gain stronger social support that enhances their sense of belonging and serves as a strong protective factor against the effects of racism and discrimination throughout their college careers (Willis & Neblett, 2019).

Among forms of social support, informational (e.g., advice, information, suggestions) and instrumental (e.g., individual or organization providing services or assistance) appear to be particularly salient to Black college athletes (Carter-Francique et al., 2013). Carter-Francique et al. (2013) studied the impact of social support on academic success in nine African American college athletes attending PWIs. Through semi-structured interviews, they found that the athletes found advisers, tutors, peers, and teammates as critical components of a social network that was particularly supportive and imperative in how they defined and achieved their academic successes.

The value of culture and the idea of cultural wealth are essential for understanding the intersection of social support and Black college student-athletes academic and athletic experiences (Carter-Francique et al., 2015). The idea of cultural wealth comes from the concept of cultural capital coined by Pierre Bourdieu (1977). This cultural capital is embedded in the idea that a person's likeness to the dominant culture is what provides their worth, which stems from the ideologies of the white, male, and upper-middle-class (Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Yosso, 2005). Thus, African American college student-athletes receive the message from the ideologies of the dominant culture that their worth is found, not in themselves as young adults, but as a result of their athletic abilities. However, community cultural wealth, which is the accumulation

of someone's abilities, knowledge, and skills that have been learned in a community of color in order to survive and resist macro and micro forms of oppression, can serve as a protective factor for this population (Yosso, 2005). There are six interdependent forms of capital within the concept of community cultural wealth: aspirational capital (i.e., resilience), navigational capital (e.g., social mobility), social capital (e.g., social networks and resources), linguistic capital (e.g., speaking more than one language), familial capital (e.g., cultural knowledge), and resistant capital (e.g., oppositional behavior; Auerbach, 2001; Delgado-Bernal, 1997, 2001; Faulstich Orellana, 2003; Solorzano & Bemal, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Yosso, 2005). Social capital, or "a person's current and potential social networks (i.e., formal, informal) and resources to included knowledge and accomplishments that can be utilized to succeed in social institutions" (p. 160), is seen as particularly beneficial and is connected with someone's culture and SES, and being connected to one's culture and community can influence motivation and desire to succeed (Carter-Francique et al., 2015). Therefore, the opportunity for Black student-athletes to have (or access new) social capital can influence their academic and athletic development and overall well-being (Clopton, 2011).

Carter-Francique et al. (2015) also described cultural capital in terms of privilege such that having access to social networks and knowing your culture can be considered a privilege most commonly held by white individuals. Black students often are perceived as inferior to their white counterparts because of their upbringing rather than acknowledging how the systems to which they belong may have oppressed and limited them. Carter-Francique et al. (2015) also discussed the importance in finding ways to address the needs of Black student-athletes and making sure they have adequate representations of African Americans within their staff, coaches, and their athletic systems. Having social support is vital for Black college student-athletes, but

systems may fail them without having an understanding of their backgrounds and identities and without acknowledging cultural capital. For example, academic support personnel play critical roles in supporting the development of student-athletes of color (Singer, 2005). However, these personnel often are not adequately trained or equipped with the skillset necessary to address, understand, and appreciate the needs of these students, particularly if the students are from impoverished or troubled backgrounds. Thus, academic advisors, and professionals within other positions of power, must learn how to better understand and support Black college student-athletes to optimize their holistic development.

Research findings suggest that although student-athletes have historically experienced more psychological distress than non-athletes, they also tend not to utilize mental health services while in college (Ballesteros & Tran, 2020; Rosenthal & Wilson, 2008). For example, Rosenthal and Wilson (2008) examined 1,773 diverse college students' use of mental health services and found that these students significantly underutilized such services. More than 75% of the surveyed college students experienced elevated levels of psychological distress, yet they did not seek counseling services within the prior 6 months. The authors attributed the college students' low help-seeking rate to the possibility that they may have been unable to recognize that their psychological state is unusual, or they may have been unaware of effective coping skills or how to ask for help to build coping skills when in distress. Similarly, Ballesteros and Tran (2020) studied racial/ethnic minority (i.e., African American, Latino, Asian American) varsity athletes at a Division I university and found that 78% of these athletes reported some type of mental health need (e.g., experiencing an emotional or stress-related problem that warrants psychological care," p. 1), but only 11% reported using mental health services in the past year. These results demonstrate that racial/ethnic minority students in general, and athletes in

particular, are experiencing high levels of mental health need (Zivin et al., 2009), and are not

seeking assistance from the available campus mental health resources. Ballesteros and Tran

(2020) believed the discrepancy between mental health need and mental health service utilization

may be due to cultural experiences that label mental health services as taboo, especially both for

racial/ethnic minorities and athletes. Further, racial/ethnic minority athletes may feel

overwhelmed by managing both athletic and racial identities, particularly on PWIs, which may

contribute to their psychological distress.

Existing research outlines the wide range of coping skills athletes utilize, including

talking to family and friends, seeking mentorship, and religious coping (Anshel et al., 2010;

Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Skein et al., 2018; Utsey et al., 2000). Additionally, coping mechanisms,

such as racial socialization, can help lessen the detrimental impact of experienced racism and

discrimination on African Americans (Anglin & Wade, 2007). Ultimately, research supports that

coping and social support can benefit both the mental and physical health of Black individuals.

However, more research needs to be conducted to better understand the coping strategies and

social support of Black male college athletes (Anshel et al., 2010), as well as their mental health

needs and how to improve mental health service utilization. The systems in which athletes exist

(e.g., academics, college athletics) must develop ways to promote and advocate for the mental

health of Black college athletes.

Need for Change

The need for change in order to provide Black college student-athletes with more socially

and racially just experiences on college campus and promote their overall well-being is apparent.

Many studies shed light on possible programming, relationship building, and student

involvement that may help accomplish these goals (Beamon, 2014; Kelly & Dixon, 2014;

Melendez, 2008; Sadberry & Mobley, 2013). For example, Beamon (2014) argued that it was imperative for universities to racially diversify their faculty, coaching staffs, athletic-academic counseling staffs, administration, and student bodies. That is, having a more racially diverse campus would likely help alleviate some of the mistrust and isolation Black student-athletes experience (Melendez, 2008). Further, Melendez (2008) offered the idea of establishing mentorship programs in which Black faculty, staff, coaches, and alumni who are familiar with the struggles of Black students at PWIs can help provide key relationships to alleviate the isolation felt by Black student-athletes. Such mentoring may help address some of the unmet support needs of Black college athletes, particularly as they transition into college (Kelly & Dixon, 2014), as well as provide guidance and stability that may help retain African American students, who tend to be an at-risk population (Beamon, 2014).

In addition to forming dyadic mentoring relationships, programs that connect students with the community in order to bridge the gap between predominantly white communities and Black college athletes is another avenue to pursue (Melendez, 2008). Establishing liaisons and strong partnerships with service organizations in the community can help student-athletes feel connected and help diminish the amount of mistrust and rejection they may feel in relation to their experiences within the broader community. Researchers also have suggested that coaches, academic advisors, and administrators need to be intentional about understanding the authentic experiences of racism and discrimination felt by Black student-athletes and to build stronger relationships with them (Sadberry & Mobley, 2013).

In considering the detrimental effects of racism on Black college student-athletes' mental health and well-being, it is crucial that university and college counseling centers be proactive in promoting their mental health (Anglin & Wade, 2007). Additionally, racial support groups can

give Black student-athletes a space to gain support during their transition to college and discuss race-related topics, including racial identity and racial socialization and the racial inequalities they are likely facing. Educational and psycho-educational programs that are designed to address the social dynamics on campus and the racism and prejudice prevalent on PWI campuses and in the communities, and interventions and tools for Black student-athletes to help cope with the consequences of the racism and prejudice would be highly beneficial (Beamon, 2014; Melendez, 2008). Additionally, diversity training for professors could help them recognize their unconscious stereotypes of African Americans and student-athletes (Beamon, 2014). With this training, they may diminish the covert racism in the classroom and help foster a more positive atmosphere conducive to academic success for the athlete. Recent research outlines how such diversity training can be most effective (e.g., through well-defined diversity strategy, realistic goals; Kulik & Roberson, 2008). Sadberry & Mobley (2013) also suggested that athletic departments should not only be aware of issues on their respective campuses and in their communities that foster racist or other discriminatory ideologies or policies, but should speak out against these policies and advocate for and support organizations and programs that fight to maintain an inclusive community. Intercollegiate athletics have an excellent opportunity to provide support for a drastically underserved population in Black college student-athletes, but there remains a great deal of progress to be made in better understanding the experiences of these individuals.

Overall, previous research outlines potential avenues through which various systems and individuals embedded in the lives of Black male college athletes can better support the unique needs of this population (Anglin & Wade, 2007; Beamon, 2014; Melendez, 2008; Sadberry & Mobley, 2013). However, in light of recent current events (e.g., the deaths of George Floyd and

Breonna Taylor, the shooting of Jacob Blake) and the breadth of high-profile athletes speaking out against racial injustice (Asmelash, 2020; Horn, 2020), there remains a glaring gap in the literature that fails to provide the athletes themselves with the opportunity to advocate for what needs to change within college athletics. Granting Black male college athletes with this platform can help shed light on what they believe will better support their overall psychological well-being.

Summary

African American athletes historically have endured racism, discrimination, isolation, and other racial inequalities both overt and covert (Beamon, 2014; Brooks & Althouse, 2013; Martin, 1993). Much of this treatment persists today in college athletics, particularly at PWIs where Black athletes are exploited for their athletic abilities (Edwards, 2000; Melendez, 2008). Additionally, this exploitation is visible in the drastic underrepresentation of African Americans in leadership positions (e.g., head coaches, NCAA administrators; Forde, 2007; NCAA, 2010). Upon enrollment, Black male college athletes are expected to commit the majority of their time and effort to athletics (Hyatt, 2003), which pulls them away from academic responsibilities and perpetuates prejudices and racist beliefs held by these athletes' professors and peers that they are less capable intellectually (Anglin & Wade, 2007; Beamon, 2014). Although offered a "free" education, the deal made between Black athletes and PWIs is often one of financially exploitation that does not benefit the student (Cooper, 2016; Melendez, 2008).

Critical race theory (CRT; Delgado, 1995) provides a framework through which to understand the experiences and listen to the voices of Black male college athletes. Each of CRTs five tenets provides a critical lens through which the racism that is so deeply embedded with American society may be viewed. Specifically, the tenets of permanence of racism and

storytelling offer great insight into the underlying issues that perpetuate racism in college sport, as well as the lived experiences of the athletes operating within that system. This framework grants a unique opportunity to give voice to Black student-athletes who are targets of racism within institutions that are embedded with ideas and practices that maintain white dominant culture.

Chronic racism and discrimination are detrimental to the well-being to Black college athletes (Lapchick, 2010; Steinfeldt et al., 2010). The college experience provides a great deal of stressors to all college students, but African American students are faced with greater obstacles in college adjustment, academics, social development, and psychological health than their white counterparts (Beamon, 2014; Lapchick, 2010). The expectation is that student-athletes are at institutions to be athletes first and foremost, which then interferes with commitments and roles in other areas (Simons et al., 2007), resulting in difficulty adjusting to college and ultimately vast discrepancies in graduation rates compared to their peers (Lapchick, 2011). Black male college athletes are more likely than their white peers to suffer from depression and anxiety (AIR, 1989) and are forced to navigate racist remarks and beliefs inside and outside the classroom on campus (Melendez, 2008). Additionally, Sadberry & Mobley (2013) found that the cumulative impact of the experienced racism and discrimination are devastating (e.g., maladaptive coping behaviors, interpersonal problems, and increased suicide rate) and needs to be addressed in order to better support the well-being of Black male college football players.

Historically, African Americans have developed a variety of coping strategies, often out of survival (Mendez et al., 2018; Park et al., 2018). Religious coping is common within the African American community (Boyd-Franklin, 2003) and has been shown to provide individuals with strong social support, one of the most important and common coping mechanisms for this

population (Utsey et al., 2000). More specifically, Black college male athletes are more likely than both white athletes and Black female athletes to engage in problem-solving and avoidance coping strategies, working to find a solution by focusing on other tasks not related to the stressor (Anshel et al., 2010). With the chronic racism and discrimination experienced by Black male college athletes on campus, it is imperative that they learn and develop strong, adaptive coping skills. Additionally, these athletes' social support is vital to foster because of the research that emphasizes the isolation and exclusion these athletes often feel (Beamon, 2014; Melendez, 2008).

Changes need to occur at the classroom, institutional, and cultural level to foster a healthier and more positive environment for Black college athletes. Several researchers who have studied this population have provided excellent ideas to help instill that change. Beamon (2014) called for universities to add racial diversity to leadership and staff campus-wide. Melendez (2008) offered the idea of creating mentorship programs to help establish meaningful relationships and social support for Black athletes. Sadberry & Mobley (2013) argued for coaches, academic advisors, and other administrators to be intentional about their time with athletes and demonstrating that they care and want to listen about their genuine experiences. Many of the changes introduced are a starting point to uprooting the white dominant culture in the intercollegiate athletic institution and building a more equitable environment for all athletes.

Purpose

Steinfeldt et al.'s (2010) findings that Black student-athletes are forced to negotiate the student, athlete, and social roles, while also navigating prejudice and discrimination supports the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenological experience of Black male college student-athletes. A deeper understanding of these experiences will help inform

effective ways to better meet their psychosocial needs. Beamon (2014) gave voice to Black male former college basketball and football players regarding their experiences of racism, providing a deeper understanding of these athletes' previous lived experiences on their respective campuses. However, there remains a paucity of research comprehensively examining current Black male collegiate athletes' experiences of racism and discrimination, how such experiences may impact their psychological well-being, and the role coping and support may play in these processes. Further, such studies need to be conducted with athletes who represent revenue sports within Power 5 conferences, because it is within such PWIs that the most exploitation and discrimination and racial inequality is likely to occur (Brooks & Althouse, 2013). Finally, although researchers have made suggestions on how institutions might meet the psychological needs of Black male student-athletes and address systemic racist policies and beliefs, allowing the affected athletes themselves to provide input may shed light on new ideas for change.

Thus, the purpose of the current study is to examine Black male collegiate football players' lived experiences of racism, racial inequality, and discrimination within the realm of collegiate sport in general, and their team and athletic department in particular. Within this purpose, I aim to better understand how these experiences have impacted the athletes' psychological well-being and mental health and what coping resources and social support they have used to manage the potentially adverse effects of their experiences. My specific research questions are:

1) What is the nature of racism and discrimination experienced by Black male collegiate football players?

2) What are the consequences of these racially discriminatory experiences on the athletes' psychological well-being?

3) How do Black male collegiate football players respond to experiences of racism, racial inequality, and discrimination, and what type of support do they seek and receive for these experiences?

4) In what ways do Black male collegiate football players believe that society, athletic departments, and their respective teams can better support them and promote their well-being and mental health?

Within each area of inquiry, I will prompt the athletes to think about collegiate athletic departments and related personnel (e.g., coaches, teammates, athletic trainers) as well as larger societal, relational, familial forces that may exist and how these may intersect and influence their coping, support and well-being. For example, athletes will be prompted to consider the ways in which athletic departments, and the broader collegiate athletic system, impact their well-being and to make suggestions for how these systems might evolve to better serve the needs and promote the mental health of Black collegiate male athletes.