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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore participants' academic experiences and confidence about their academic achievement. Participants ($N = 27$) consisted of high-achieving African American male student–athletes from four academically rigorous American universities in the Pac-Ten conference. Most of the participants competed in revenue-generating sports and were interviewed to obtain a deeper understanding of their successful academic experiences. Utilizing a phenomenological approach four major themes emerged: “I Had to Prove I’m Worthy,” “I’m a Perceived Threat to Society,” “It’s About Time Management,” and “It’s About Pride and Hard Work.” Stereotype threat and stereotype reactance are investigated in relation to findings. Recommendations for scholars and practitioners that work with student-athletes are also articulated.

Keywords

African American male student–athletes, academic experiences, stereotypes, stereotype reactance and success

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Since 2003, when Myles Brand became president of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the association has focused much of its attention on the academic reform movement and the accountability of diverse populations to have systematic opportunities in collegiate athletics. Although the academic reform movement impacts all sports, Division I football and basketball baseline Academic Progress Rate (APR) scores were the lowest respectively (Franklin, 2005). Some critics and scholars attribute these academic outcomes (i.e., educational achievement, graduation, career development, and occupational excellence) to a culture of revenue-generating sports in terms of its commercial appeal and fan consumption (Zimbalist, 1999). Others attribute football and basketball academic performance and retention (negative) issues to the overrepresentation of African American males who participate in revenue sports versus African American male students. However, researchers have not concluded or even systematically investigated what contributes to African American male academic success in football, basketball, and other sports (Martin & Harris, 2006). What has been the focus of the research on African American male student-athletes (Oseguera, 2001)?

Exploring stereotype threat processes of minority groups in previous research has indicated the salience of negative stereotypes on academic performance. Stereotype reactance and how African American male student-athletes respond to being stereotyped within the academy may be useful to combating the stereotype. A number of theoretical and practical questions regarding how stereotype threat affects human performance require further investigation (Harrison et al., 2009). First, it is important to continue to identify groups for whom the salience of negative stereotypes in a performance context can decrease their ability to achieve. Theoretically, the content of the cultural stereotypes about a target group and aspects of the performance context itself should determine how and why stereotype threat impedes performance.

Second, it is important to examine what behaviors other than test performance are affected by the threat of confirming a negative stereotype. For example, if targets are capable of anticipating the threat of confirming a negative stereotype well before they begin a performance, they may engage in strategies that are designed to mitigate the threat before entering the performance situation (Stone, 2002). It may also be informative to interview groups who face negative stereotypes in efforts to understand some of the strategies and how certain populations cope with negative perceptions (Benson, 2000; Lawrence, 2005). Another informative approach includes survey research investigating the dynamics of stigmas and stereotypes that student-athletes face (Simons, Bosworth, Fujita, & Jensen, 2007).

Third, little research has been conducted on how targets (i.e., individuals or groups who are exposed to biased or limited perceptions) cope with repeated exposure to stereotype threat. That is, once they have experienced stereotype threat in a performance context, it is not known how targets respond when they must enter that performance situation again. A concept that may be helpful to understanding responses to negative stereotype perception is *stereotype reactance*. Stereotype reactance is characterized by a resistance to negative characterizations, a challenge to cultural assumptions, an increase in academic effort, and an enhanced motivation to succeed

(Kray, Thompson, & Galinsky, 2001). Kray et al. (2001) expanded on this concept as follows:

Negative stereotypes held by others are one obvious limitation that could affect performance for members of social groups (e.g., women and African Americans). We expected reactance to occur when an individual was explicitly told that his or her social category was a liability for an important task, such as a negotiation. When women are explicitly threatened (i.e., made aware of the correspondence between the stereotypes of women and ineffective negotiators), they react by engaging in behaviors that are counter to those prescribed by the stereotype. (p. 948)

We theorized that psychological reactance also operates when people perceive limitations to their ability to perform (Stone, Perry, Sjomeling, & Darley, 1999). Negative stereotypes held by others are one obvious limitation that could affect performance for members of social groups (e.g., women and African Americans). We expected reactance to occur when an individual was explicitly told that his or her social category was a liability for an important task, such as a negotiation. We hypothesized that when women are explicitly threatened (i.e., made aware of the correspondence between the stereotypes of women and ineffective negotiators) they react by engaging in behaviors that are counter to those prescribed by the stereotype. We call this stereotype reactance and distinguish it from stereotype confirmation (Kray et al., 2001, p. 948).

Last, very little is known about how to empower targets to reduce the negative impact that stereotype threat has on their performance (Harrison et al., 2009). Providing targets with self-resources for disarming the threat in a performance context could be helpful for enhancing their performance, especially when interpersonal and contextual strategies are not available in the situation (Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). Few researchers have yet to empirically document the prevalence and consequences of the biased lens through which student-athletes are perceived and/or how they successfully cope with being stereotyped as an inferior target. Indeed, college student-athletes may face unique problems because of the stereotypes people hold about them. Researchers propose that in some academic situations, stereotypes about student-athletes distort perceptions of individual performance, and in other situations, just the mere salience of the stereotypes has the potential to undermine their best performance efforts in the classroom.

The academic performance problems associated with stereotypes about student-athletes are not well documented; few cultural strategies have been systematically developed to enhance the performance of student-athletes in the classroom. Documenting student-athletes' experiences of coping with negative stereotypes provides a useful vehicle on shedding light on an important source of bias in American higher education. Some researchers have investigated African American male student-athletes' academic achievement utilizing qualitative approaches (Benson, 2000; Donnor, 2005; Godley, 1999; Harrison, 1998). However, in-depth ethnographies with high-achieving African

American male student-athletes have received scant attention. Benson (2000) posits the need to fill this overlooked aspect of academics and athletics: "Future research should continue to investigate student-athletes' experiences and perspectives so as to add to the body of descriptive literature that may help redesign educational practices" (p. 242). Some recent research has encouraged scholars and practitioners to go beyond the dominant narrative in terms of education with Black males in sport. (Hodge, Harrison, Burden, & Dixson, 2008): "Members of the educational community must find relevant ways to help Black students understand the difference between an over-emphasis on sport and a balanced focus on sport pursuits while successfully navigating the educational system (p. 944)." For instance, educators, coaches, and other sport leaders should do more to highlight positive athletic and nonathletic role models. It is important to highlight the academic successes of Black youth as ardently as athletics triumphs that are more publicly displayed in sport arenas and stadiums. Black youth must come to know that accomplishments outside of sports are valued and respected (Hodge et al., 2008).

Central Focus

The purpose of this study was to explore participants' academic experiences and confidence about their academic achievement. The central research questions examined are as follows:

Research Question 1: What is poignant for African American male student-athletes with regard to their academic experiences?

Research Question 2: What are African American male student-athletes' experiences of confidence in regard to their academic achievement?

Method

A phenomenological approach is a form of qualitative inquiry, which focuses on human experience. The primary goal of this approach is to inductively and holistically understand human experience in context-specific settings (Patton, 2001). Because of the sensitive nature of the study and the aim of the researchers, a phenomenological interview was employed to collect data. One of the purposes of this study was to explore participants' confidence about their academic achievement, which is a sensitive topic for college athletes, especially because of the many negative stereotypes associated with them. Phenomenological interviews (Thomas & Pollio, 2002) were utilized to gain insight and a deeper understanding into the academic experiences' of African American male student-athletes. The aim of a phenomenological interview is to obtain a first-person account of some specific domain of experience (Thomas & Pollio, 2002; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989), and the interviewer attempts to capture the perceived experience of the person interviewed in his or her own words. Researchers' desire was to give participants an active and dominant voice. A phenomenological interview gives the participant control without predetermined structured questions

(Patton, 2001). Typically, the interview utilizes a probing statement that is not even a question. This process allows the participants to share solely what is central to their experiences (Patton, 2001).

Patton's (2001) strategy of *purposeful sampling* was employed. The purpose of this strategy is to select information-rich cases for in-depth study. The size of the sample and specific cases depend on the study's purpose. According to Patton (2001), decision of sample size depends on the following factors: (a) what the researcher wants to know; (b) the purpose of the study; (c) what is at stake; (d) what will be useful; (e) what will have credibility, and (f) what can be done with available time and resources. In this study, the following criteria were utilized to purposefully select participants: (a) student-athletes who attend Research I and Division I universities in the Western region of United States; (b) cumulative grade point average at or above a 2.8; (c) African American male student-athletes who participate in the intercollegiate sports of football, men's basketball, track and field, or soccer; and (d) African American male student-athletes who are on schedule to graduate in 5 years or less.

Participants

Twenty-seven participants in 2004-2005 were selected as eligible African American male undergraduates who had competed in football, basketball, track and field, and soccer. Participants were from four Research I institutions. The universities are located in the Western region of United States and are as follows: Stanford University, University of California at Berkeley (UC Berkeley), University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), and the University of Southern California (USC). These institutions are similar in terms of size, academic rigor, geographic proximity, and athletic conference. Collectively, the universities enroll 72,239 undergraduates, with 3,502 (4.9%) African Americans. The enrollment of African American students ranges from 3.7% to 8.8% at the selected institutions. In addition, nearly 31% of the African American students at these institutions are men. Two universities are public and two are private.

Procedure

An initial consultation with the athletic administrators and counselors from the universities took place to introduce the aims of the study and to identify all African American male student-athletes who were eligible for participation in the study. The required criteria for participant selection were conveyed to athletic administrators and athletic academic counselors at the universities. Initially, approximately 40 African American male student-athletes were recruited for this study. Because of limitations in regard to criteria and availability the participant pool was condensed. The participants contributed to this investigation on a voluntary basis. Prior to the interviews, participants read and signed the informed consent form. Next, the primary researcher participated in a bracketing interview to identify his biases, assumptions, and stereotypes. Bracketing means to suspend one's theoretical presuppositions prior to engagement with the phenomenon under investigation (Van Maanen, 1983). The aim is to utilize purposeful

bracketing of one's preconception to understand phenomena from the perspective of those who experience it (Van Maanen, 1983). The interview is performed to sensitize the interviewer to conceptual biases that might serve to change his or her interpretive vision (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997; Thomas & Pollio, 2002). After completion of the bracketing interview, the initial and follow-up interviews were conducted with each participant.

Interview Protocol

The interview stage included two unstructured audiotaped interviews—an initial interview, followed by an analysis for theme development, and a follow-up interview. Interviews were conducted in a private, quiet room located at the participant's university. The initial interview lasted 1 hr and the follow-up telephone interview approximately 15 to 20 min. The use of open-ended statements allows the interviewer to gather the data being sought without making the dialogue exchange inflexible and restrictive (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). During the initial interview, participants were prompted with the following four open-ended statements:

1. Tell me about your academic experiences at your university.
2. Tell me how you are perceived on campus as an African American male student-athlete.
3. Tell me about the challenges of balancing academics and athletics.
4. Tell me about your sources of motivation to perform well academically.

The primary researcher made an effort to make the interviews as conversational and exploratory as possible, which allowed participants to be comfortable with expressing their perceptions, expectations, and values regarding their academic experiences.

Following the initial interview, the audiotape was transcribed and a copy of the transcript was given to the participant. If the participant felt some aspect of the contents needed revision, he so indicated and then returned the transcript. A follow-up interview was conducted with each participant via telephone. Themes were developed through the use of an interpretive research group prior to the follow-up interview that was conducted with each participant (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This process will be detailed in the data analysis section. During the follow-up interview, a summary description of the themes for each transcript was given to the participant. The purpose of this interview was to obtain clarification and offer the participant an opportunity to add any other information (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). All participants confirmed the accuracy of their individual transcripts and offered agreement concerning the themes for each transcript.

Data Analysis

Before coding and analyzing the data, the primary researcher critically examined himself as the investigator of this study. This self-examination process, known as *epoche*,

allows the researcher to remove or at least become aware of prejudices, viewpoints, or assumptions regarding the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2001). Thus it was important for the researcher to enter the analysis phase with a fresh and open viewpoint excluding any prior knowledge or experiences of the population under study.

According to Patton (2001), phenomenological analysis seeks to grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or group of people. Similarly, Creswell (1998) posits, phenomenological data analysis occurs through information reduction, analysis of relevant statements, identification of common themes, and a search for all possible meanings emerging from the data.

An interpretive research group, which consisted of four individuals trained in qualitative research methodology, one of which was the primary researcher, was utilized throughout the data analysis process. Initially, the interpretive research group read the transcripts of each participant separately to get a sense of the whole of each transcript. Moustakas' (1994) recommendation of finding statements from the interviews about how the participants experienced the phenomenon was utilized by interpretive group members. They listed significant expressions and thoughts in the margins and treated each statement as having equal worth. This process is called *horizontalization*. Next, the researchers organized and sorted key phrases using NVivo, a qualitative data management software program. This process resulted in the identification of 23 invariant constituents, which did not vary more than 84.7% of the time (Moustakas, 1994). The invariant constituents were later clustered into thematic categories.

After the 23 invariant constituents were identified, *textural descriptions* (what the academically driven student-athletes experienced) and *structural descriptions* (how the participants had experienced the phenomenon) were written for each of the 27 participants. These summaries were then used to generate accurate descriptions of how the phenomenon was experienced. A combination of 27 textural and structural descriptions, coupled with the 23 invariant constituents, produced four major themes that captured the true essence of the participants' shared experiences.

Results

Qualitative themes were derived from participants' responses to the four open-ended interview statements previously mentioned. Four major themes emerged from the participants' experiences of academic achievement: "I Had to Prove I'm Worthy," "I'm a Perceived Threat to Society," "It's About Time Management," and "It's About Pride and Hard Work." Participants were assigned pseudonyms that are indicated at the end of their quotes. The institution the participants attend was also listed at the end of their quotes. The titles of the themes are directly from the participants' words, which is a technique termed "in vivo coding" (Ryan & Bernard, 2000).

"I Had to Prove I'm Worthy"

The theme, "I Had to Prove I'm Worthy," involved participants' who felt the need to show their professors and fellow classmates (nonathletes) that they were worthy of

being students at prestigious universities. Though they all spoke highly of their relationships with professors and appreciated the ambitions of their nonathlete peers, participants consistently noted that they had a point to prove. Specifically, within this theme, the participants were prompted with the following open-ended statement: Tell me about your academic experiences at your university. The follow-up questions were as follows: “How do you feel you are perceived on campus as an African American male student–athlete? Do you feel that you are taken seriously as a student?” Consider the following comment:

Being a Black male football player, I feel that I have to prove that I can handle Stanford academics. I don’t have any room for mistakes. (Jim: Stanford University)

Participants reported not receiving the “benefit of the doubt,” which caused them to question their abilities to compete in the classroom. This desire to compete was best described by the following student-athlete:

A lot of times people look at me and put me in a box. They figure since I’m Black, and an athlete, I probably don’t have much to say and that I’m just trying to stay eligible. With that said, I try to do extra reading and take extra notes so that I can articulate my thoughts in class. Sometimes I even volunteer to organize study sessions just to let the other students know that I’m serious about academics. Most people are shocked with how assertive I am. (Devon: USC)

The need to prove their academic worth was compounded by the participants’ feelings of having a dual disadvantage. On one hand, they felt that they were considered academically incapable because they were African American male students. On the other hand, the participants also described the drawbacks of being an athlete. Consider the following comment:

I’m penalized twice, because I’m both a Black male on campus and I’m an athlete. I feel that I have to work twice as hard as some of my White teammates. (Jerome: UC Berkeley)

Participants constantly referred to their White teammates as “having it easy” recognizing they do not have to deal with the expectations and pressures of being an African American male student–athlete. Participants respected their White counterparts; however, they acknowledged the differences in which they had to navigate to survive at their institutions. Furthermore, the participants also expressed the importance of proving themselves to other African American students. They mentioned how some African American students were never convinced that they were serious about their roles as students. This participant offered his thoughts regarding the stereotypical attitudes of African American students on campus.

I feel that there are definitely stereotypes of Black male athletes on campus. Black students who don't participate in athletics feel that we haven't struggled like they did to get to UCLA. They feel that we're basically statistics and that we're not true students. Some Black students on campus won't even speak to me, because I have on a UCLA athletic T-shirt or sweats. Some of them just don't believe that we belong on campus. (Kelwin: UCLA)

"I'm a Perceived Threat to Society"

The theme, "I'm a Perceived Threat to Society," consisted of participants' who reported that they were threatening to others in society. Student-athletes were cognizant of the plight of African American men in America. They were aware of the dismal statistics and the alarming facts that underscore the hardships of African American men nationwide. This awareness motivated the participants to relish their "edginess" by discovering new ways to compete against the top students in their classes, furthering their leadership pursuits, remaining equipped with new skills and knowledge, and sustaining a relentless determination to succeed. Participants were prompted with the following open-ended statement: Tell me how you are perceived on campus as an African American male student-athlete. The follow-up question was as follows: "In what ways are you different than other non-African American male students on your campus?" Participants described their feelings of being threats to society with the following reflections:

I'm doing everything that society doesn't want me to do. I'm a Black man working on a degree from one of the top universities in the world. I feel that I'm a double threat, because I'm an athlete. So I feel that I have two chances to prove to show [them] that I can do something with my life. (Jerome: UC Berkeley)

Most people on this campus and in society in general think that all Black men are failures. By me being on the Dean's List, earning a spot on the Pacific 10 All-Academic Team, and doing something positive with my life, I feel like I'm a threat to the people who have had it easy in this world. I feel good about what I have accomplished. (Kelwin: UCLA)

Student-athletes also reported that their classmates are curious about them, which motivates them to excel academically; consider the following two participant quotes:

By me majoring in Engineering, a lot of my White classmates are curious about me. They want to find out what motivates me to do well on exams and be one of the best students in the class. I guess they haven't seen many Black men who are on the same playing field as them. This motivates me to work even harder. (Freddie: Stanford University)

I know White people look at me and say, “Who does this guy think he is.” He walks in confident and cool, just knowing that he’s going to outperform us. How does he do it? I’ve never seen a Black man like him. When they give me that look, I know that I’m putting something on their minds. (Devon: USC)

Student-athletes cited education as their way of competing with societal expectations and stereotypes; consider the following participant quote:

If I’m smart, I can accomplish anything that I want. I can control my own destiny. (William: Stanford University)

Some participants wanted to use their education to make a difference in the lives of other African Americans. As one student-athlete commented,

If I had the chance to be an investment banker or a Heisman Trophy winner, I would choose being an investment banker any day of the week. How many Black kids are able to see other Black investment bankers in their communities? How many Black investment bankers do you see on television? I want to be the example for young Black kids. I want to show them that they don’t have to be the next Kobe or Jordan to make it in this world. That’s what society is preaching to them. (Devon: USC)

One participant discussed exceeding within the “rules of the game” of society. He expounded on how some African American men have not learned how to be successful by playing by the rules. This student-athlete expressed that many African American men desire “fast money” and are not willing to work hard with the cards they have been dealt. Although he felt that he was a threat to society, he did not feel the need to inform the world of his successes.

It’s one thing to know that you’re a threat, but it’s another thing to be arrogant about it. I’m going to play within the “rules” by remaining humble and quiet about my accomplishments and what I plan to do in the future. I’m going to stay on my game plan. (Larry: UCLA)

Participants were aware of the negative stereotypes and preconceptions of them on their campuses. Instead of the student-athletes accepting these perceptions, they worked extremely hard to prove that they were capable of epitomizing their roles both as students and athletes. Several students talked about not taking spring and summer vacations to commit additional hours of study for upcoming exams. Other participants admitted to not sleeping the night before midterm and final exams, as indicated in this quote:

As a Black man, I only have one chance to make it. If it takes me putting in the extra hours, that’s what I will do. (James: USC)

“It’s About Time Management”

The theme, “It’s About Time Management,” consisted of participants who reported that they have to utilize their time management skills. Academically successful Division I student-athletes are required to tightly manage and prioritize their daily schedules. None of the participants considered themselves to be poor time managers, but instead reported that they tried to be productive every minute of each day. The participants were prompted with the following open-ended statement: Tell me about the challenges of balancing academics and athletics. The follow-up question was as follows: “How have you been successful at balancing the demands in the classroom and the expectations of your sport?”

Berkeley student-athlete Jerome considered studying a couple of hours before football practice, instead of wasting time watching television, to be good time management. He expounded on the importance of making time to “hit the books.” This time for Jerome was critical because he had so many other things that had to get done throughout the day. He elaborated in the following comment:

It’s important that I get some study time in before practice. Sometimes I have night classes, tutoring sessions with my mentee, or team meetings in the evening. I need to take advantage of that time. (Jerome: UC Berkeley)

The participants unanimously confirmed that being on the road or traveling for athletic contests affected their time to study. Interviews with local and national media, team meetings, team practices, and competing in games were all a part of “being on the road.” The participants discussed having team study sessions in between practices; however, almost all of the student-athletes admitted to being unproductive during these sessions. James explained the system he uses to get his studying done.

Most of the time I’m distracted by my teammates. Guys joke and play around during our study time. I can’t get anything done. (James: USC)

James talked about getting as much done as possible before traveling for games. He reported that he did not sleep much the four nights before travel day because he studied for an additional 3 hr each night.

I’ve been on this system since my freshman year. If I put in the time before I have to travel, I can rest and focus on the game. Most guys just don’t have a system. (James: USC)

Contrary to the aforementioned remarks, the participants at Stanford University maintained that their study sessions on the road were highly engaging and productive. They indicated that the study sessions offered opportunities to work collaboratively with their teammates on various academic projects. Stanford student-athlete Freddie concluded,

My teammates and I definitely make use of our time on the road. Many of us have similar majors like Political Science or Engineering and we work together. We understand the importance of taking advantage of these couple of hours in between film sessions, and practices. It just wouldn't make sense to waste this time. (Freddie: Stanford University)

A student-athlete who has successfully managed his daily schedule has undoubtedly allotted enough time to take a quick snooze. The participants identified "power naps" as being a requisite for their survival and successes. This time of rest occurred during random times throughout their days.

Sometimes I just crash in the locker room before practice. (Larry: UCLA)

Without exception, this "nap time" allowed the participants chances to replenish and recharge themselves from exhausting practices, community and campus involvement, and attending classes. Berkeley student-athlete Shane offered,

If I don't take a nap throughout the day, I'm no good. I'll dose off in class, be slow on the field, and won't have the energy to work hard in the weight room. (Shane: UC Berkeley)

USC student-athlete Devon reflected on the importance of getting extra sleep.

I remember one day last month when I had a crazy day. I had class from 8.00 a.m. to 2.00 p.m., I had track practice from 2.30 p.m. to 4.00 p.m. I had to lift weights from 4.00 p.m. to 5.00 p.m., then I had pick my girlfriend's car up from the shop by 6.00. From 7.00 p.m. to 10.00 pm, I had tutors and study sessions. Believe it or not, I had a team meeting at 7.00 a.m. the next morning. I came home after that meeting and crashed until noon. I went to class from 12.30 p.m. to 2.00 p.m. and then came home and took a short 1-hr nap before practice. This gave me that extra energy that I needed to study later that evening. (Devon: USC)

Clearly, the academically driven participants were faced with a unique set of challenges. They all were forced to balance their academic, athletic, and social lives. While entrenched in this struggle, the participants found ways to be successful exemplary students and respected athletes. The fact that participants are determined to exceed the expectations of individuals who only acknowledge their athletic prowess is impressive and will be explored in the following section.

"It's About Pride and Hard Work"

In addition to acknowledging their parents for being academically driven, the participants were in no way shy about giving themselves credit for their own sacrifices and

hard work toward their achievements. Almost all of the student-athletes had strong, edgy, and confident personalities that inevitably resulted in them taking pride in everything that they embarked on. Participants were prompted with the following open-ended statement: Tell me about your sources of motivation to perform well academically. The follow up question was as follows:

“How did they keep the motivation and drive going?” One student-athlete commented:

Having pride is just a part of me. (Freddie: Stanford University)

Moreover, each student-athlete talked about having high standards for himself. In no way were the participants going to compromise these standards and expectations. USC student-athlete James asserted,

It’s about having pride in everything that has my name on it. I don’t accept mediocrity in anything, especially when it relates to school. (James: USC)

Other participants recalled having pride in the classroom at early ages. USC student-athlete Devon noted,

In elementary school, I always took pride in getting A’s and B’s. I pushed myself to get a 100% on a spelling test or be the first one to finish my math exam and to have all of my answers correct. I guess this type of pride just carried over into high school and college. (Devon: USC)

The participants spoke extensively about how they have worked extremely hard to be thriving student-athletes in college. All of the student-athletes talked about how they constantly pushed themselves beyond their limits. They conveyed a certain degree of passion when asked questions related to their work ethic. From their responses, the primary researchers concluded that the student-athletes wanted to make the point that nothing had been “handed” to them—that their status as academically driven student-athletes did not come without pain, sacrifice, and a fervent desire to persist and be the best. Stanford student-athlete William, shared,

Unlike my teammates, I’m married with a daughter. With that said, my work habits and time management have to be on point. There are a lot of days when I’m tired and don’t want to wear the many hats that I’m forced to wear, but I have no choice but to work my butt off in school and in basketball. (William: Stanford University)

The student-athletes consistently referenced their athletic work habits and commitments when discussing their pursuit toward academic excellence. They discussed in detail all of the extra shooting, weight workouts, and film review sessions they endured

to be accomplished athletes. All but three of the participants expressed that they strived to work just as hard in the classroom as they did in their respective sports. It was this same work ethic that set them apart from other student-athletes who reportedly only had athletic priorities and agendas. Berkeley student-athlete Jerome offered the following remarks:

If I shoot 300 jump shots a day after practice, I try to put an extra hour of study time toward studying for an exam. My 300 “jumpers” will allow me to knock down a jump shot in the clutch, but not being prepared for an exam could affect my grade in a major way. I can't handle that.

Discussion

This investigation allowed researchers to document the impact of stereotypes on high achieving African American male student-athletes, which are predominately negative, inaccurate, and socially shared. Researchers documented the voices and counter-stereotypical academic performances of African American male student-athletes and revealed many of the stereotypes that they face and have to successfully navigate on campus.

Steele's (1997) stereotype threat theory has proven to affect students' academic motivation. For minority students and student-athletes in higher education, this phenomenon can potentially hinder academic performance. However, the present study indicates more evidence of stereotype reactance or what we might call “academic adequacy” among the participants. While “threat” and power of traditionally elite White institutions was realized by many of the participants, the findings were more in line with Radcliff's (1991, as cited in Benson, 2000) research. Radcliff (1991, as cited in Benson, 2000) explained,

Successful black students demonstrate a sense of control over their lives; hold high aspirations for themselves; possess academic goals that are supported by peers, friends, and families; understand the nature of racism; and voluntarily participate in community service. (Radcliff, as cited in Benson 2000, p. 241)

The present findings are not parallel to Benson's often cited research on African American male student-athletes. Benson (2000) concluded that her own research reveals deficit findings by juxtaposing her evidence with Radcliff's findings: “Few of these attributes were revealed by the student-athletes in this study (meaning her own)” (p. 241). Nonetheless, Benson (2000) encouraged other researchers to expand on NCAA high-profile sports and the student-athletes who participate in American higher education while on athletic scholarship as explained in her following quote:

This study should provoke an examination of the extent to which the stated end of improving African American student-athletes' learning and academic performance

is being achieved by the policies and practices in place in academic programs for at-risk student-athletes. (p. 239)

Benson (2000) extended implications for policy and practice by suggesting that student involvement (in concert with structural elements of the schooling experience) be the focus of a shift in academic attitudes of African American male student-athletes. An important aspect of student involvement is for students to be heard. This is why the present study “gave voice” to the African American male student-athletes.

Participants consistently noted that they had to prove they were worthy of attending prestigious universities. They strived to debunk existing stereotypes of academic inadequacy. This is consistent with Steele and Aronson’s (1995) claim that students experiencing feelings of stereotype threat oftentimes reflect an “I’ll show you” response aimed at invalidating the stereotype. Furthermore, Steele (1997) reported that when African American students are continually faced with the threat of being judged or viewed as being academically incapable, they may gradually come to devalue school performance. According to this hypothesis, “If the poor school achievement of ability-stigmatized groups is mediated by misidentification, then it might be expected that among the ability stigmatized, there would be a disassociation between school outcomes and overall self-esteem” (Steele, 1997, p. 623). Though the academically successful student-athletes said that they felt the stress of stereotype threat, they did not extricate themselves from performing well academically to protect their self-esteems. Instead of devaluing academic outcomes, they deemed achievement in the classroom their top priority. In short, this hypothesis does not parallel the participants’ persistence and resolve toward their educational endeavors because the participants in this study approached various stereotypes and stigmas with proactive strategies and coping mechanisms. Much like athletic competition, the student-athletes faced their academic challenges and gave it their best effort.

However, some researchers contribute this positive academic performance to be a phenomenon of role separation versus role integration and/or role involvement. As Settles, Sellers, and Damas (2002) stated, “It seems to reinforce the benefit of viewing the two roles as separate and distinct regardless of the level of interference that the individual experiences” (p. 580). In fact, the same researchers found that student-athletes who view the roles of student and athlete as distinct report more positive self-esteem and lower levels of stress and depression. They also concluded that student-athletes who view being an athlete and being a student as separate roles report higher levels of psychological well-being and suggest that role interference may be due to increased involvement in one or both roles.

There has been some literature that supports current findings and also counters long-held assumptions about African Americans in school. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) found that African American students in high school perceived academic achievement as “acting white,” “selling out,” and not representative of African American behavior. This single study from the 1980’s is being challenged by scholars. Cook and Ludwig (1997) studied 25,000 students at public and private high schools in contrast to the

school studied by Fordham and Ogbu (1986). These researchers (Cook & Ludwig, 1997) found that dropout rates were similar for African American and White American students. Their (Cook & Ludwig, 1997) findings indicated that cutting class, missing school, and completing homework varied little by race and were consistently the same when family characteristics were equitable. They (Cook & Ludwig, 1997) also found that the African American students who were members of academic honor societies were more likely than other Black students to view themselves as “cool” or popular and that African American students who belonged to honor societies in homogenous African American schooling environments were more popular than their peers who had not received such an honor. Cook and Ludwig (1997) concluded that there was little evidence in their study to buttress the inference of resistance to academic achievement by African American peer culture. Interestingly, Yopyk and Prentice (2005) have found evidence that might explain this finding and the thematic data in the present study. Researchers (Yopyk & Prentice 2005) contributed to the growing scholarly evidence that the social self is comprised of diverse identities. In terms of student-athletes and students of color (i.e., Latino, African American), their study found that “Identity-related processes to the academic underperformance so often observed among members of these groups deserves further investigation. Who one is and how one performs at any given moment depend critically on the relative salience of one’s social identities” (p. 335). While indirect, these same data reveal that the salience of competing identities is based on a given task.

All of the previously mentioned findings by various researchers are noteworthy when considering academically driven African American male student-athletes. The present study challenges pathologies about the success of African American males in higher education. The two major themes that involve participants having to prove they intellectually belong and are being faced with the challenge of being a threat once they prove they are academically competent, magnifies the dilemmas that African American males face in sport and society as being visible beyond athletic or body performances (Coakley, 2007). There must be a new educational and racial logic developed by the external and internal forces that shape the mindsets of African American male student-athletes. Hence the need for a label for student-athletes that is distinct (Settles et al., 2002), involved and integrated on campus (Astin, 1993), task relevant, salient (Yopyk & Prentice, 2005), and culturally relevant to their environment (Dyson, 2005).

Limitations

One of the methodological shortcomings involves the use of grade point average (GPA) in the criteria for selecting participants. Several researchers have noted that GPA is not the best indicator of success after college (Pascarella et al., 1999; Tross, Harper, & Osher, 2000). The clear similarities of the data collection sites (four highly selective institutions) presented a limited view of the experiences of undergraduate academically driven African American male student-athletes. These institutions are all similar in terms of size, academic rigor, geographic location, and athletic conference.

Participants who met the criteria from other institutions (i.e., Historically Black colleges and universities [HBCUs], Ivy League universities, liberal arts colleges) might report different experiences. Finally, a different research design may have produced significant findings as well. For example, the use of a peer group approach would have required a different interview protocol; therefore, results could have varied from the current findings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study has examined an overlooked topic, academically driven African American male student-athletes who successfully deal with stereotypes and stigmas on traditionally White campuses. As Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, and Major (1991) challenged scholars, “[R]elatively little research has focused on the subjective experience of members of stigmatized groups. Understanding the consequences of social stigma requires an understanding of the phenomenology of being stigmatized” (Crocker et al., as cited in Harrison, 2002, p. 67). The athletic voices and academic victories reported by participants are a positive step in the direction of understanding these subjective experiences through the phenomenological methods. In the words of a poet and a former New York University student Talib Kweli, “it is important to consider the facts drugs, basketball, and rap, there’s more to us (African American males) than that.” Present findings support Mr. Kweli’s observation that there is more than the deficit perspective to African American males’ academic performance. The present study began to answer two critical questions posed by Benson (2000): “What would happen if we spoke with these students rather than about them and sought to understand them rather than to categorize, judge, and reform them? What if we allowed ourselves to consider evidence of their experiences of themselves within the complexities of their varied and interactive experiences of schooling?” (p. 246).

Implications for Policy and Practice

Division I athletic directors need to be more cognizant of the academic and social needs of African American male student-athletes. Instead of relying on head coaches to be the primary individuals responsible for the overall success of student-athletes, athletic directors need to be more “hands on” and involved. Athletic directors should meet with African American male student-athletes as a group and underscore high academic expectations and appropriate behavior on campus. During this annual presentation, athletic directors should allow student-athletes to have “voice”—opportunities to express challenges, fears, and goals for the upcoming year. In addition, African American male students who demonstrated exemplary academic performance, as well as student-athletes who earned laudable campus and community awards the previous year, should be recognized. This will definitely set a precedent for both academic achievement and out-of-class participation.

Recruitment and retention of African American athletic administrators, coaches, and academic staff is key to improving the college experiences of African American male student-athletes. The participants in this study unanimously concluded that having African American administrators and academic advisors was critical to their academic persistence and performance at their respective universities. The academically driven student-athletes did not devalue their relationships with athletic officials from other races/ethnicities; however, they noted a keen interest and comfort level with several African American staff members, particularly African American men. Athletic directors should have more conversations with African American staff to discover more ways to ensure meaningful and positive academic, social, and personal experiences for African American male student-athletes.

Furthermore, athletic directors need to hold college head coaches more accountable for the academic success of African American male student-athletes. Simply delegating academic responsibilities to assistant coaches and graduate interns is not enough to assure academic success among this population. The participants in this study spoke extensively about how their coaches frequently addressed the need to excel in the classroom, but how their actions were incongruent with their words. They further claimed that coaches were only concerned about receiving the extra incentives and perks for graduating a high percentage of their players. Instead of offering incentives for high graduation rates, athletic directors need to terminate coaches who do not demand that student-athletes attend classes, utilize academic resources (e.g., tutors, learning specialist, and advisors), and respect their professors. Indeed, some coaches win conference and national championships, but academic neglect and underachievement is not central to the mission of higher education.

In addition to holding coaches academically accountable, athletic directors need to monitor the type of student-athletes whom coaches are recruiting, particularly African American male student-athletes. Before transcripts, applications, and other pertinent information are submitted to the university admission office for review, athletic directors should carefully peruse student-athlete profiles. A student-athlete's GPA, SAT, or ACT score, character references, and personal essay should be thoroughly examined. Given that most African American male student-athletes are recruited to participate in high profile revenue sports, more athletic directors need to study their cases and decide if a particular student-athlete is fit to meet the demands of the institution. Just because a student-athlete is the best high school basketball player in the nation does not mean that his nonathletic profile is suitable for a particular institution. Simply put, athletic directors should not give coaches *carte blanche* on the type of student-athletes who participate in their athletic programs. By not doing this, attrition rates will continue to soar for not only African American male student-athletes but for all male athletes participating in revenue generating sports at Division I universities.

Finally, although the participants in this study were academically driven, they all cited various psychological and emotional challenges (e.g., phases of low academic confidence, athletic motivational issues, relationship struggles with women, and conflicts with coaches). Atkinson, Jennings, and Liongson (1990) contend that African

American male student–athletes may be reluctant to use counseling services due to the scarcity of cultural similar and sensitive counselors, and their failure to offer cultural-comfortable therapy. Though the participants consistently noted receiving personal advice and direction from their academic counselors, none of them mentioned going to the counseling centers on their respective campuses. Counselors within student affairs should contact coaches and athletic administrators in an attempt to educate student-athletes about the available counseling services offered on campus. As student-athletes are educated on the counseling services, they should understand that these services serve as support systems for managing their academic and student roles, coping with forms of racism, and solving personal dilemmas. Most important, counselors should convey to the student-athletes that the services are merely designed for them to discover ways to solve their own issues. In sum, counseling services are vital to the success of African American male student–athletes; therefore more efforts are needed by student affairs administrators to reach out to this population.

Student-athletes as a group need more interaction and direction from career counselors. Indeed, the 27 academically driven student-athletes in this study all aspired to attend graduate school and have noteworthy professional careers. However, they were not receiving adequate career advice from individuals within the athletic department. Simply put, they could have benefited tremendously from experienced career advising professionals. With this said, career counselors need to have more interaction with student-athletes on their campuses. Career counselors should attend athletic events and meetings (e.g., monthly coaches meetings, Student-Athlete Academic Council meetings, Student-Academic Academic Services events, etc., and provide an overview of their services. This is not to say that they should be fully responsible for taking this type of initiative; however, in most cases, career services do not factor in student-athletes lives until their athletic eligibility has been exhausted. To this end, alliances should be established between career advisors, athletic officials, and student-athletes to promote career exploration in nonathletic fields.

Future Research

There remains a paucity literature that focuses on the academic achievement of African American male student–athletes. Similarly, Lumas (1997), Person and LeNoir (1997), and Edwards (2000) contended that more efforts are needed from athletics administrators and NCAA officials in fulfilling the academic needs of this population. Identifying the similarities and differences of African American male student–athletes with praiseworthy academic profiles across various institutional types would produce valuable findings. Researchers should investigate academically driven African American female student–athletes at highly selective Division I institutions.

Other racial groups (Whites, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Islanders) of academically driven male student-athletes should be explored. Insights into the academic perceptions and experiences of these groups would unquestionably offer a sizeable contribution to the existing literature regarding student-athletes. In the final analysis, more research

should be conducted in general about all student-athletes that gives them “voice” to their academic successes and counter-athletic stereotypes.

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