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White College Students' Explanations of White (and Black) Athletic Performance: A Qualitative Investigation of White College Students

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While the sport sociology community has had a long-running conversation about the relationship between athletes' success and race, there are few empirical investigations of individuals' attitudes regarding the connection of race and athletic performance. This study on White college students' explanations of White (and African American) athleticism attempts to push this discussion of race and sport. Using a qualitative, open-ended question we elicited explanations from White college students about athletic performance. Findings revealed that White students explained White athleticism through discussions of African American athleticism. In addition, White student participants avoided biological explanations regarding White athletes' success.

Quoique la communauté de la sociologie du sport ait une conversation continue au sujet de la relation entre la race et le succès des athlètes, il existe peu d'études empiriques sur les attitudes des individus au sujet de ce lien entre la race et la performance sportive. La présente étude tente de pousser plus loin la discussion sur la race et le sport et porte sur les étudiants universitaires blancs et leurs explications des qualités athlétiques des blancs et des Africains-Américains. En utilisant des questions ouvertes, nous avons élicité des explications sur la performance sportive de la part d'étudiants universitaires blancs. Les résultats sont à l'effet que ces derniers expliquent les talents athlétiques des blancs par le biais de discussions sur les talents athlétiques des Africains-Américains. De plus, les participants ont évité les explications biologiques quant il s'est agit du succès sportif des blancs.

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There is an ongoing discussion regarding sociological explanations for athletic success (see, e.g., Coakley, 2010). The sociological explanations for athleticism and athletic success can be generally categorized into two themes: athletic success is based on natural, biological talent and athletic success is dependent on economic, environmental, and/or social conditions surrounding athletes. The proponents of the first explanation hold that genetically determined racial differences strongly impact and influence athletic performance (Entine, 2000; Rushton, 2000). The second explanation—athletic success is dependent of social factors—is more prevalent within sport sociology. According to this explanation, athletic performance is a result of cultural factors (e.g., familial support, encouragement, media influences) and socioeconomic status (e.g., access to resources, exposure to particular sports; Coakley, 2010; Comeaux & Harrison, 2004; Johnson, Hallinan, & Westerfield, 1999; May 2009). Both explanations are often linked with “race.”

When linked with explanations of athletic success, the definition of race is commonly based on skin color. Coakley (2010) defines race as “a population of people who are believed to be naturally or biologically distinct from other populations” (p. 276). According to Coakley (2010), race exists only when individuals use a classification system based on genetically-determined physical traits to divide people into distinct categories. When athletic success is attributed singularly in one explanation based on skin color, this discussion turns into a subtle form of racism. For example, some previous research accredits African American athletic superiority purely to genetics instead of to other cultural factors (Entine, 2000). These explanations are supported by pseudo-scientific evidence regarding differences in tendons, muscles, and/or hormonal levels that purportedly provide African American athletes with superior sporting physiques. These differences, however, have been found to have slight and no direct correlation to athletic performance (Carter, Chevront, Harrison, Proctor, Myburgh, Brown, & Malina, 2010). As Lapchick (1991) states, “after fifty years of trying to prove the genetic superiority of blacks as athletes, science has proved little. Culture, class and environment still tell us the most” (p. 236).

White athletes’ success, in turn, is generally explained based on cultural factors in addition to genetic factors. Based on this explanation, White athletes’ success depends on what sports they are exposed to and encouraged to participate as children, what role models they have available (May 2009), what financial resources they have available (Comeaux & Harrison, 2004), and what overall cultural influences are at play when choosing what sport(s) to participate in (Johnson et al., 1999). Some research acknowledges the cultural context for African American sport participation, but usually only to note that African American culture focuses on athletic success as a viable means of upward social mobility (Edwards, 2000; Lapchick, 1991). White athletic success is explained as a result of “hard work” whereas the athletic performance of African Americans is seen as a direct result of “God-given” talent. For example, former White collegiate running back stars such as Luke Staley (Brigham Young University) and Toby Gerhart (Stanford University) have achieved at superior levels at a position with few non-African Americans. However, their success is typically attributed to work ethic and determination versus genetics or natural ability (Hart, 2010).¹

The majority of previous North American research on race and athletic performance has focused on the African American athlete (e.g., Harrison & Lawrence,

2004; Entine, 2000; Gilroy, 2000; Harrison, 2001; St. Louis, 2004). These previous studies examined the success of African American athletes in sports such as boxing, basketball, American football, and track and field, indicating in various ways that persistent stereotypical beliefs about African Americans perpetuate notions of racial athleticism and African American superiority with respect to athletic performance. Within this body of research, numerous scholars (see, e.g., Harrison & Lawrence, 2004) have investigated how White college students explain African American athletic superiority. However, relatively few scholars have critically examined how White college students perceive and explain *White* athleticism (see Harrison, Azzarito, & Burden, 2004).

This research note contributes to this nascent area of inquiry, and extends the studies by Harrison and Lawrence (2004), Sheldon, Jayaratne and Petty (2007), and Azzarito and Harrison (2008) to analyze White college students' attitudes about White athletic success. Using a qualitative approach to gather responses from White college students about their perspectives on White athleticism in sports such as basketball, American football, and track and field, we examined the following three research questions: a) What are contemporary White college students' perceptions of White athleticism?; b) What factors do White students attribute White athleticism to?; and c) How do White students explain race in regard to White athleticism?

Methodology

This study is part of a larger study that examined college students' attitudes and perceptions regarding athletic performance, focusing on participants' written responses to one open-ended question. As Rich and Cargile (2004) suggest, a critical analysis of student "voices" can demonstrate that the perceptions and attitudes of students do not occur in a vacuum, but instead are expressed in response to one another and reflect the broader cultural context in which students live and participate. The primary goal of the qualitative research team was to identify themes that emerged from participants' responses in the hopes of learning more about White college students' attitudes on White athletic performance.

Participants

Participants ($N = 231$) were White college students from a predominately White University, and included females ($n = 162$, 70%) and males ($n = 69$, 30%). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 26 ($M = 19.68$, $SD = .864$). All of the participants self-reported their race as White. This study was conducted at a large research University. Participants were freshmen and sophomores in an introductory communications class.

Many participants (136, 59%) had not read any scholarly articles about natural athleticism of African American athletes. Thirty-three (14%) participants had read two articles on natural athleticism, 30 (13%) participants had read one article, 16 (7%) participants had read three articles, 11 (5%) participants had read between four and nine articles, and five (2%) participants had read ten or more articles on natural athleticism. Both male and female (96.7%) participants attended University sporting events; 140 (86.7%) female participants attended athletic events at least once each year and 61 (88.5%) male participants attended athletic events at least once per year.

Seventy-percent of the participants were female. While the significance of gender should not be disregarded, the results of Sheldon et al.'s (2007) methodological analysis of White Americans' genetic explanations for a perceived race difference in athleticism did not support their hypothesis that issues concerning athleticism are more salient for White American men than women and thus impact the two groups differently. Hughes and Tuch (2003) also found very small or nonexistent gender differences in attitudes about racial minorities. The goal of the current study was not to test differences between White men and women but rather to interpret the findings while acknowledging that most of the participants were White women.

Open-ended Research Question

The open-ended question used to examine students' perceptions of White athletic performance was: *White athletes have long been categorized and labeled as possessing "White man's disease" and phrases such as "White men can't jump" have prevailed in society. Do you feel that White athletes are inferior in certain sports (i.e., football, basketball, track and field)? Explain why you agree or disagree with these notions.*

To increase specificity and the probability that participants would move beyond the level of general statements, *retrospective inspection* was encouraged (Flick, 1998). Retrospective inspection is a questioning technique that facilitates emotional and deep responses to a particular situation or circumstance. Participants can be supported in recalling a specific situation by using materials (e.g., an excerpt, text, or picture) and corresponding questions (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1990). Merton et al. (1990) referred to this as "explicit reference to the stimulus situation" (p. 78).

Procedure

Participants were presented with the purpose of the study and were given an informed consent form. First, participants answered the open-ended question. Next, they were debriefed as a group. Data collection took place in a quiet classroom and lasted 25 min; debriefing lasted 65 min. The length of student responses ranged in length from two sentences to an entire paragraph. Each student received attendance points from their instructor for participating in the study.²

Data Analysis

Initially, a four-member investigative team was formed. All members (coders) were involved throughout the data analysis process. Data were transcribed. The established unit of analysis was one paragraph. Then, each coder independently read each of the units of analysis line-by-line to get a sense of the responses (Glaser, 1978). Then, the process of "open coding" was used as the coders identified potential themes by pulling together examples from the participants' responses (Bernard, 1994). The third independent reading of the data involved a *memoing* technique, and code notes were formed by the coders. The investigative team met to interpret and identify key categories and themes. Next, the team identified two main categories for the responses (Patton, 2001). The researchers identified major and minor themes within each of the categories (See Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1 Category: Cultural Athletic Success N = 231

Cultural Athletic Success		
n	Percentage	Major/Minor Themes
134	58%	2 Major Themes 2 Minor Themes

Table 2 Category: Natural Athletic Success N = 231

Natural Athletic Success		
n	Percentage	Major/Minor Themes
97	42%	2 Major Themes

The researchers used a criterion percentage to determine major and minor themes. If 14% or less of participants reported on a topic, it was determined to be a minor theme. If 15% or more of participants reported on a topic, it was determined to be a major theme. The ATLAS software program was used to verify and assist with the accuracy of determining the number and percentage of participants that responded within each of the major and minor themes based on the student narratives (Stake, 2000).

Results

Similar to the results found in previous research on race and athletic success, the following two categories emerged from the participants' responses: a) Cultural Athletic Success; and b) Natural Athletic Success. The following sections outline the categories as well as the major and minor themes associated with each category.

Cultural Athletic Success

The *Cultural Athletic Success* category encompasses participants' responses suggesting athletic performance is a result of cultural factors (e.g., familial support, encouragement, media influences) and socioeconomic status (e.g., access to resources, exposure to particular sports). This category reflects participants' explanations that athletes play certain sports based on socialization through family and peer groups. Participants also recognized factors such as opportunity, determination and racial media stereotypes, which influenced participants' ideas about athleticism.

The category of *Cultural Athletic Success* is comprised of two major themes: *Perpetuated Media Stereotypes and Emphasis on Sport and Perseverance*; and two minor themes: *Disproportional Representation and Opportunity and Chances* (See Table 3).

Perpetuated Media Stereotypes. Within the major theme of *Perpetuated Media Stereotypes*, participants acknowledged the strong influence of media messages, which maintain powerful stereotypes that have adverse effects on how athletes are

Table 3 Category: Cultural Athletic Success ($n = 134, 58\%$) Major and Minor Themes: Descriptive Percentages of Participants' Responses $N = 231$

Major Themes	n	Percentage
Perpetuated Media Stereotypes	58	25%
Emphasis on Sport & Perseverance	35	15%
Minor Themes		
Disproportional Representation	23	10%
Opportunities & Chances	18	8%

perceived. Participants disagreed with the myth of White athletic inferiority and blamed the media for perpetuating such myths. As illustrated by the following participant quotes, participants realized how the media impacts how they conceptualize race and athleticism:

The media may present a certain message that could have an impact, but you cannot group athletes into the categories of White and African American and compare them physically in their respective sporting arenas. Different people have different talents. (214)

White athletes are not inferior in sports compared to other races. However, media would like me to believe that Whites have the mental capacities to play a sport like golf (supposedly unlike Blacks) and that Blacks have the physical capacity of performing a sport like track (supposedly unlike Whites). (57)

The theme of *Perpetuated Media Stereotypes* consisted of 25% (58/231) of participants who commented on the influence of the media on individuals' perceptions in regard to athleticism (see Table 3). The responses of participants illustrate a tendency to attribute responsibility to others (such as the media) for creating and perpetuating racial stereotypes (Andrews, 2001; Billings, 2004; Billings & Eastman, 2002; Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000; Wheeler, Jarvis, & Petty, 2000).

Emphasis on Sport and Perseverance. Within the major theme of *Emphasis on Sport and Perseverance*, participants' explanations emphasized that athletes are exposed to (and are also encouraged to) participate in particular sports based on available role models (May 2009), financial resources (Comeaux & Harrison, 2004), and cultural factors (Johnson et al., 1999). Fourteen percent (32/231) of the participants explained that participation in sports is influenced by familial involvement, access to resources, and local popularity of specific sports.

White and Black athletes can compete competitively against each other in any of these sports—just look at the diversity of the Olympics. Ethnic culture may push a certain race of a person more toward one sport than another, which is White people playing hockey or a lot of Black people playing basketball. Children can be guided into one sport by their parents, and this is not because he or she is Black and can therefore jump so they should take up basketball. (17)

White players are not necessarily inferior in certain sports. The socialization and culture of Whites and Blacks are different. Black culture strongly focuses on basketball, track, and football, while White culture focuses on baseball, hockey, tennis, and golf. Children grow up within each culture and learn to play the sport that is prevalent around them. (164)

The prevalence of certain groups in certain sports can be explained by looking at the opportunities these groups had growing up and what they were encouraged to do. Not every neighborhood has a golf course and or a frozen pond or skating rink. (18)

Eleven percent (26/231) of the participants also explained that success in athletics is due to hard work (e.g., dedication, persistent practice).

I don't think any race is inherently worse at a sport. I think ability depends on fortitude and dedication but this does not necessarily relate to race. It's more likely that "White men can't jump" because they have been told so many times that they can't that they ultimately gave up. (122)

I disagree that White athletes are inferior in certain sports. It is all about hard work. If somebody wants something bad enough and is willing to work hard to get it they can get what they want. Anyone can get what they want. It is not a matter of whether a person is African American or White. (229)

The theme of *Emphasis on Sport and Perseverance* consisted of 25% (58/231) of participants who attributed athleticism to hard work and cultural differences between particular sports (see Table 3). Some of the responses in this category—in which participants attributed the success of athletes to hard work—reinforce the racial and class politics of the respondents while discounting the access barriers that still exist for members of the nondominant racial group (Bonilla-Silva, 2010).

Disproportional Representation. Much of the dialogue on athleticism encompasses the idea that African American males “dominate” versus “participate” in sports such as football and basketball. Within the minor theme of *Disproportional Representation*, participants reported the number of athletes who participate in certain sports is inaccurately linked to athletic inferiority or superiority. Participants reported White athletes are not inferior, but it may seem like they are because of the comparatively low participation rates of White athletes in certain sports.

It may seem that Whites are inferior in sport because of the numbers. If you look at the NBA or NFL, there is a huge majority of African Americans but that does not mean that Whites are inferior. More African Americans have dreams of being a star athlete one day and so they work at it more. They use athletics as a way out of the urban areas. So we see a larger amount of African Americans in urban sports like basketball. (221)

White athletes are not inferior it's just been shown many times that there are many more African Americans on those types of sports teams so they are then assumed to be better at it and white men are inferior. It's all a matter of stereotypes. Whether or not there is any basis to them. (60)

The minor theme of *Disproportional Representation* consisted of 10% (23/231) of participants who reported that overrepresentation of a certain race in specific sports does not necessarily mean members of that race are athletically superior to an underrepresented race (see Table 3).

Opportunity and Chances. Within the minor theme of *Opportunity and Chances*, participants attributed athletic ability to athletes' opportunities. Participants explained opportunities reflect family class levels and the neighborhoods athletes grow up in. The idea is that the athletes' economic status and their access to sports-related resources (e.g., equipment, facilities) affect an individual's athletic participation and development. Participants reported that athletes from White upper-class families have historically had more educational opportunities, which influence differences in cultural focus (Coakley, 2010). Participants noted African American culture focuses on athletic success as an effective means of upward social mobility (Edwards, 2000; Lapchick, 1991). While more professional opportunities beyond athletic participation exist with academic success considered as the primary path to upward mobility, participants articulated the inequities of society and how that shapes one's career journey.

Whites aren't intrinsically inferior in any way, it just seems less Whites exceed (sic) at sports because they are not as sports intensive. Sports seem to be a way out of poor undesirable environments, and in the U.S. it seems that more poor people who have it worst are black. (34)

There is no genetic difference between Blacks and Whites, the difference comes from culture. Blacks have traditionally worked more and thus built up muscles that Whites have not. Whites had more educational opportunities and focused on these areas. Blacks have used sports as a ticket out of poverty and have focused on them more. (162)

I do not agree with the "White man's disease" theory because there are numerous White athletes playing these sports that Black athletes are supposedly better in. White athletes have not been able to hold the majority in these sports because they grow up in upper class environments where academics are stressed more than athletics, while it is reversed in lower class neighborhoods. (230)

The minor theme of *Opportunity and Chances* consisted of 8% (18/231) of participants who recognized differences in opportunity between races (see Table 3). Some participants clearly believed that Blacks and "Black neighborhoods" view athletics (and not academics) as the most viable path to social and financial success.

In sum, 58% (134/231) of participants invoked comments which fall under the overarching concept of *Cultural Athletic Success* (see Table 1). Participants seemed to buy into the common negative stereotype that the economic status of African Americans is worse than that of Whites. Bonilla-Silva (2010) argues that such stereotypes reflect "cultural racism" that relies on culturally-based arguments to explain the lower standing of minorities in society. Although recognizing the discrimination of African Americans, participants explained how African Americans

have made a choice to use sports instead of education to escape poverty. Irizarry (2010) argued that because such explanation is based on negative stereotypes, it blames the institutionally oppressed and discriminated group (African Americans) of their own victimization.

Natural Athletic Success

The category of *Natural Athletic Success* consists of participants' responses that acknowledged inherent or genetic differences in athletic ability among athletes.

Participants' explanations suggested differences in athletic ability are due to an athlete's natural ability regardless of race and also due to genetic differences based on racial makeup. The category of *Natural Athletic Success* was comprised of two major themes: *Natural Athletic Ability* and *Genetic Inferiority* (See Table 4).

Natural Athletic Ability. Within the major theme of *Natural Athletic Ability*, participants suggested all athletes are successful due to their physical traits and "God-given" talents. Participants explained the significance of natural talent in the development of athletic skills.

I don't proscribe (sic) to the idea of "superior genetics" based on race. You can be a "natural" athlete regardless of race if you take well to a sport. (81)

Anyone can achieve anything and that "natural talent" doesn't always pertain to a certain race or ethnicity. There are other social factors that contribute to this stereotype that "White men can't jump." (123)

Participants reported both natural ability and skill development are significant factors for athletic achievement.

Natural talent and potential is what differentiates professionals from the rest of us. (38)

Every professional athlete must work hard and possess natural talent, no matter what race. (82)

Twenty-five percent (58/231) of participants attributed athleticism to natural physical ability (see Table 4). Participants tended to disregard race and focused on factors such as an athlete's level of determination, hard work, and time commitment to their sport.

Table 4 Category: Natural Athletic Success ($n = 97$, 42%) Major Themes: Descriptive Percentages of Participants' Responses $N = 231$

Major Themes	n	Percentage
Natural Athletic Inferiority	58	25%
Genetic Inferiority	39	17%

Genetic Inferiority. The major theme of *Genetic Inferiority* represents participants who attributed athletic ability to race-related biological and physiological factors. Participants suggested African American athletes tend to be more successful in certain sports due to physical traits. The racial makeup of an athlete served as the deciding factor concerning the athleticism debate, as the following participants' comments illustrate:

African Americans are built in a way that allows them to succeed in this field, such as their height and large muscle mass. Because of the typical build of a white person, in a lot of cases they become inferior to an African American athlete within that same sport. (165)

They are biologically and physiologically inferior to Blacks on average in some physical activities. Different genetic profiles yield different abilities, it's not brain surgery. If Blacks generally have more muscle mass, or the ability to develop more muscle mass, or have more fast-twitch muscle fibers on average, then yea they can probably jump higher or faster. Whites sprint in track, why are not there many or any Whites at the Olympic 100m finals, you think it's because Blacks work harder—hardly. Whites do the same amount of work, they are simply slower. (156)

White athletes are not inferior but rather that African American athletes possess certain unexplainable physical characteristics that enable them to perform in certain sports—especially basketball and track and field. The sheer majority of African Americans that excel in these sports supports this notion. (152)

The above quotes indicate some participants were informed by, and their beliefs were perhaps validated by, ideas that perpetuate racial, but unfounded pseudo-science (see, e.g., Entine, 2000). Participants also provided explanations that attributed athletic performance to differences in tendons, muscles, and hormonal level even though these differences have been found to be slight and no direct correlation of these with athletic performance has been affirmed (Carter et al., 2010).

Blacks are slightly better athletes in some sports. It's been scientifically proven that their tendons are shorter which causes them to jump higher and run faster. (209)

There is an actual physical/muscular distinction between Blacks and Whites. I believe this is part of the reason why Blacks excel at certain sports that require the usage of more fast-twitch muscles. Hard work and talent are by no means unimportant factors in athletic success. (203)

Seventeen percent (39/231) of participants reported differences between races based on biological and physical traits (see Table 4). Participants reported race to be a significant factor in athletic prowess. Some participants seemed to think that African Americans and Whites have drastically different genetic profiles, and that genes can be solely responsible for athleticism. The influence of popular media forms and possibly coaches' comments could have produced these beliefs. Overall, 42% (97/231) of participants attributed athleticism to *Natural Athletic Success*, which includes disparities in racial makeup, natural talent, and genetics (see Table 2).

Discussion and Conclusion

The responses in the current study indicated that the White student participants generally avoided biological or race-based explanations regarding the performance of White athletes. They attributed White athletic inferiority to cultural and socioeconomic factors such as familial encouragement and emphasis on academics, as well as media influences and access to sport-related resources (Comeaux & Harrison, 2004; Johnson et al., 1999; May 2009). Interestingly, although the participants were directed to explain the athletic abilities of Whites, a number of participants responded with statements about the athletic abilities of African Americans. They offered drastically different explanations regarding the athletic ability of African American athletes. Seventeen percent of participants gave genetic explanations for African American athletic superiority, but 58% of participants provided cultural explanations for White athletic inferiority. Some participants were reluctant to recognize any genetic White athletic inferiority with respect to performance in American football, basketball, and track and field, but rather explained the absence of successful White athletes in these sports through cultural expectations that do not value sport. It is significant to note that not a single participant response reported the complexity and diversity of other ethnic minority groups' athletic performance beyond African Americans and Whites.

Critical race theorists would explain that our results reflect the "common sense" racist discourse in the United States (St. Louis, 2004). Labeling African Americans as "naturally" athletic might celebrate the biological superiority of the African American body, but at the same time preserves White privilege through the assumed mental superiority and work ethic of Whites (see King, Leonard, & Kusz, 2007). Consequently, American discourse on race and sport has traditionally operated with White masculinity normalized as the standard of excellence and African American masculinity considered as inferior (Azzarito & Harrison, 2008). Such categorization, nevertheless, preserves the socially created categories of African American and White men (Davis, 1990; McDonald, 2005). As previous research demonstrates, the media aligns with such categorization: White athletes are depicted as successful because of hard work and African American athletes as successful because of innate athlete ability (Billings & Eastman, 2002; Eastman & Billings, 2001; Murrell & Curtis, 1994). Current findings show that many of the White college students, accordingly, discounted the role that skin color plays in determining the athletic ability of White athletes as such explanation would have confirmed the perceived inverse relationship between natural athletic ability and intelligence (Sheldon et al., 2007; Stone, 2002; Stone, Lynch, Sjomeling, & Darley, 1999; Stone, Perry, & Darley, 1997).

Slightly departing from the previous categorization, some participants believed that hard work is the ultimate determinant of athletic success regardless of an athlete's race. While this sentiment could be considered as transcending the racial stereotypes, Bonilla-Silva (2010) finds it a subtle manifestation of the "new racism." He argues that disregarding racial differences ("colorblindness") overlooks the effects of past and current discrimination relating to the social, economic, and educational status of African Americans to safeguard White privilege. In the current study, the White college students emphasized some differences such as the "natural" athletic advantages of African Americans while discounting others such as some of

the additional barriers and obstacles faced by African American student-athletes. The participants, a majority of whom were White females, evaded discussions of race and constructed athletes as “raceless.” In their study, Azzarito and Harrison (2008) also found that female high school students avoided discussion of power differences to emphasize “sameness.” They concluded that such notions are based on “individualism and meritocracy embedded in whiteness” and “erase cultural, economic, and political differences among ethnic groups (differences relevant to people’s access to opportunities in society)” (Azzarito and Harrison, 2008, p. 359).

This study, thus, highlights the need to further investigate why the White participants compared White and African American athletes although not asked to do so. In addition, it is important to analyze further why the White participants generally did not perceive genetics to be significant factor for White athletic inferiority but attributed African American athletic superiority to genetics (St. Louis, 2004). Future research should also focus on the perceptions of male and female college student-athletes, professional athletes, and coaches. In addition, differences among African American, Latino/a, Asian, Samoan, and White American men and women would be informative to the intersection of race, culture, gender, and sport. It would be also culturally useful to investigate explanations for African American athletic performance(s) with a largely African American college audience. It is important to note that participants in the current study were enrolled in a college communications class. Future studies could examine the attitudes and perceptions of college students in other categories of classes (e.g., business, engineering, history) to see if the type of class yields different empirical results with respect to student narratives.

The current study found no support for Entine’s (2000) assertion that society is reluctant to discuss race and athletic performance. Sport appears to assist college students to discuss race more openly and honestly regardless of the accuracy of their assumptions about race and athletic performance (Harris, 2007). Nevertheless, culturally relevant education and accurate, nonessentialist, and nonstereotyped media portrayals of racial groups are needed to change the culture concerning how today’s college students perceive issues relating to race and athletic performance (Sheldon et al., 2007). We hope, however, to have provided some answers to Murrell and Curtis’ (1994) call to provide more evidence as well as “strategies for reeducating both youngsters and the sport media to become more critical of the underlying assumptions and causal explanations of the performance of both Black and White athletes in new and emerging roles within sport” (p. 231).

Notes

1. Other researchers have found that media coverage of athletes often perpetuates the explanation of African American athletic success as “natural” and White athletic success as culturally constrained and requiring hard work (Edwards, 2000; Lapchick, 2000). For example, Murrell and Curtis (1994) noted that African American athletes were praised for being naturally gifted, whereas White athletes were characterized in terms of controllable influences such as hard work and overcoming natural shortcomings; Billings and Eastman (2002) analyzed television coverage during the 2000 Summer Olympics and found that White athletes were portrayed as successful because of commitment, whereas African American athletes were portrayed as successful because of innate athletic ability; and Billings (2004) added that members of the media continue to attribute the perceived athletic skill of African American athletes to “natural” athletic skill while depicting White athletes as failing athletically due to a lack of athletic skill.

Other researchers, particular those who identify as critical race scholars, connect the discussion of athletic success and race to issues of race-based domination in the United States. See, for example, the studies by McDonald (2005), King (2007), and Davis (1990).

2. After the data were collected, a 21-min video with the following five themes was shown to the class: a) natural athlete myth; b) Black athletic hero; c) baller image; d) Black women athletes; and e) White athleticism. Following the video, students engaged in a discussion about the open-ended question in relation to the themes of the video.

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