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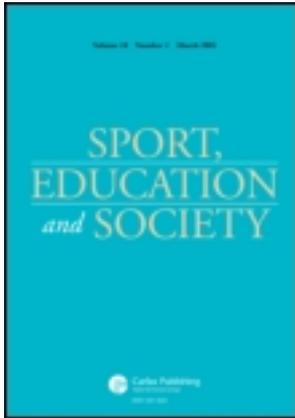
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# *College Students' Perceptions, Myths, and Stereotypes about African American Athleticism: A Qualitative Investigation*

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**ABSTRACT** *Examining the 'natural' athlete myth and utilizing the recent literature on cultural/social factors in athleticism, this study through survey research examines the myth of the 'natural' African American athlete. Participants consist of 301 university students from a large, traditionally White, midwest institution. The primary research question is to determine the attitudes of college students in terms of how they perceive the success of the African American athlete in certain sports. The purpose is to assess participants' perceptions of the African American athlete and their opinion as to whether or not African American athletes are superior in certain sports (football, basketball, and track and field). Seven major themes emerged which are descriptive of the participants' (n = 301) perceptions, thoughts, and feelings concerning the debate of African American athleticism: Black physical advantage, Black work ethic, Black cultural factors, race disregard, societal factors, Black limited opportunity, and unawareness/X factor.*

*Fanciful new constructions of race aside, modern biology leaves little doubt that our classification of races is not biological at all. Blacks having dark-skin is of as much interest as blue-eyed people having blue eyes. The immense political and emotional baggage we carry with the concept of human race, despite what might seem intuitively obvious to some people, is, in fact, a consequence of our own social relations, and is simply not a biological topic. (Vandermeer, 1996, p. 125)*

## **Introduction**

One of the most unresolved debates in the academy and the broader society is the myth of the African American athlete's superiority and dominance in a few sports. While little systematic scientific evidence confirms any genetic edge directly correlated with athletic performance, the question continues to be raised in both scholarly and public spaces. The myth of African Americans achieving in sports has been historically stagnant and has its origins with the construction and ideology of race in America. Since the latter part of the nineteenth century, professionals in fields such as coaching, athletics, anthropology, sociology, physical education, biology, medicine, and sportcasting have contributed analysis of and insight into the debate of Black athletic superiority (Wiggins, 1997). But for all that, no scientific evidence has been concluded that clearly states

African Americans are athletically superior because of genetic endowment (Miller, 1998; Coakley, 1999).

The current study examines the perceptions of college students in regards to myths and stereotypes of athleticism. Reasons for racial disparity in sport and Black athletic superiority is explored. The 'natural' athlete myth literature (Hoberman, 1997; Entine, 2000) is investigated. The cultural and social factors involved in athleticism (Proctor & Harrison, 1999; Harrison, 2000a) lends itself to the current study as well.

### *Black Athletic Superiority and Perpetuated Stereotypes*

The widely held belief in Black athletic superiority is actually fairly recent, arising only after barriers to Black participation in sports were removed (Hoberman, 1997). Currently, Black athletes are consistently stereotyped as being better athletes than their White counterparts. According to Edwards (1971), 'There are no differences that make any difference. Athletic skills are essentially culturally linked capabilities. It is racism, not genes, that explains the domination of Black athletes' (p. 38). In Hoberman's (1997) famous controversial work titled *Darwin's Athletes*, he addressed the stereotype of Black athletic superiority. Hoberman's (1997) main theme was that society's infatuation with Black athleticism perpetuates the negative stereotype that Blacks are physically superior and intellectually inferior compared to Whites. Hoberman (1997) reiterated the message that the celebration of athletically talented Black Americans, as played out in sports today, is harmful.

However, notions of Black athletic superiority and intellectual inferiority permeate the minds of thousands, if not millions, of American citizens. Part of the reason is that the manner in which this debate has been framed is biased, political, and limited in analysis. Davis (1990), in the article titled '*The articulation of difference: White preoccupation with the question of racially linked genetic differences among athletes*', illuminates the direction of the current study:

This paper focuses on the contemporary White public and scientific preoccupation with the question of racially linked genetic differences between Black and White male athletes. It is argued that the preoccupation itself is racist because it is founded on and naturalizes racial categories as fixed and unambiguous biological realities, thus obscuring the political processes of racial formation. The biological determinism underlying the preoccupation conceals both human agency and sociopolitical forces, including racism. (p. 179)

Individuals fail to conceptualize the gigantic array of sports that White athletes participate in such as National Hockey League (NHL), Major League Baseball (MLB), Major League Soccer (MLS), Professional Golf Association (PGA), and the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA). According to some sport sociologists, racism and representation are historically linked in American society (Edwards, 1969; Harrison, 1998; Hawkins, 1998). Images that depict Blacks as childlike, lazy, and hyper-physical are the major themes of media portrayals and are present in modern day society. The media often depict Black men as brutes, athletic icons, strong, and fast but rarely, if at all, as smart. These depictions cause harmful stereotypes to be perpetuated in society (Stone *et al.*, 1999).

Books such as Jon Entine's (2000) *Taboo: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We Are Afraid to Talk about it* continue to narrow this issue and overlook social and cultural factors, other ethnic groups, and the political connection of this issue in terms of

educational and occupational access, and economic attainment. A few coaches and teachers have expressed to one of the co-authors that White youth shy away from running sprints and other events because White youth claim, 'Blacks are better at this sport or that sport than we are'. Entine is partially right in the context of his title—society is afraid to discuss this issue in an overt manner. Covertly though, this discussion is taking place. As a result, cultural sound bites surface that reinforce racism such as 'White men can't jump', 'Blacks jump out of the gym', and 'speed kills'. 'Once again, research such as Entine's perpetuate the myth of the "natural" Black athlete, rather than destroying it' (Coakley, 1999, p. 4). This leads us to the cultural and social explanation of African American athleticism.

### *Cultural/Social Factors*

Several scholars and sport sociologists (Carlston, 1983; Majors, 1990; Harrison, 1998; Coakley, 2001) maintain that differences between European American and African American athletes and their performances are due to the differences in social environments and influences that impact their lives. These sociologists argue that variables of political, social, historical, ideological, and cultural strife are much more significant than the biologically determined and/or eugenic category of race.

After 30 years of investigating, reviewing research, and thinking about the issue of race and athletic performance, noted sport sociologist Jay Coakley (1999) concluded the following: (1) there are genetic differences between individuals; (2) genetic characteristics are related to sport performance; (3) it is not very probable that one gene accounts for success across a range of sports; (4) there is no scientifically recognized biological reason to suspect a connection between skin color and genes related to sport performance; (5) the development of bodies and the development and expression of physical skills are related to cultural definitions of skin color and race; and (6) culturally based ideas about skin color influence how athlete and entertainers are watched and perceived in this society. Coakley is leading researchers away from exploring the biological reasons for athletic performance and he attributes common societal perceptions to culturally based ideas.

Cultural and social factors in the debate of Black athletic superiority need to continue to be explored. Proctor and Harrison (1999) stated, 'We are not likely to convince students, faculty, staff, or the larger community that prevailing social prejudices are wrong, if we teach them only about biological factors affecting performance and ignore cultural contributions' (p. 14). Miller (1998), a sport historian, contended the significance of history and social policy in the debate of individual abilities in his following quote:

Since 'race matters,' as the title of one of Cornel West's noted book avows, we need to discuss why it should. It matters in our scrutiny of the contexts and remedies of present social conditions, in our concern that the long history of racial oppression be reckoned with as we debate social policy. We must also examine when it should not. It should not matter in judgments of individual abilities and accomplishments. (p. 124)

Race should be disregarded in judging individual performances; however, this is very seldom the case in today's society.

The highly utilized genetic explanation for athleticism fails due to the fact that the features that are explored to make distinctions among groups are usually the product of cultural evolution. Cultural evolution is more rapid than Darwinian evolution and it is

readily reversible because its products are environmentally interactive (Proctor & Harrison, 1999). Therefore, cultural evolution should prevail in the behavioral diversity displayed by human groups (Proctor & Harrison, 1999). To this end, no scholar has ever found systematic evidence that connects genetically-based, performance-related physical traits that serve as the basis for athletic performance in any or all sports (Coakley, 2001).

This investigation, through the use of an open-ended interview question, explores cultural myths and stereotypes about White American and African American athleticism. Specifically, this study utilized the Athletic Ability and Achievement Attitudes and Beliefs (AAAAB) instrument (Harrison *et al.*, in press) which was developed in collaboration with experts in the fields of sport sociology, sport psychology, sport history, and sport management, as well as logical content from related literature. The AAAAB instrument (Harrison *et al.*, in press) was developed to qualitatively and quantitatively determine those variables that most impact students' perceptions of Black and White athleticism and White athletic inferiority.

The scope of this inquiry explored the responses to one of the open-ended questions from the AAAAB instrument (Harrison *et al.*, in press) (question listed in Methods section). These two questions were developed based on two common stereotypes addressed in scholarly and popular literature on race and athleticism. This refers to the stereotypical assumption that in a few high profile sports such as football and basketball White athletes are inferior and Black athletes are superior (Hoberman, 1997). As part of a larger study, the current study examines the data from one of the two open-ended questions. The remaining open-ended question and Likert items are beyond the scope of the current study; however, they are briefly described in the Methods section of this manuscript. This explicit focus on qualitative data is due to the rich and expressive narratives by most of the participants to both open-ended questions. In terms of asking two open-ended questions, both questions were strategically positioned in the survey to avoid confusion by the respondents. This was so respondents would focus on each question separately. Both open-ended questions are proactively framed to elicit responses to the Black/White binary of athletic performance.

### **Theory and Central Focus**

Relevant literature was synthesized to further analyze the scholarly analysis of the 'natural' African American athlete. While the current study focuses on the various scholarship and conceptions of this topical debate, theories such as Allport's (1954) noted contact hypothesis appear to be salient. Allport's major thesis is that families impact the knowledge construction of their children and themselves, and that the less interaction they have with members of other ethnic or racial groups, the less likely they will have complex understandings of their behavior. In terms of race and sport and its high visibility, it is hypothesized that perceptions will be biased and uneducated. This leads this paper to focus on the following central questions: (a) do college students believe in Black athletic superiority?; (b) which factors do college students attribute successful athletic performance to?; and (c) do college students think that race has an influence on athletic performance?

## Methods

### *Participants*

Participants include 301 college students from a Midwestern university. Participants ( $N = 301$ ) are enrolled in introductory communication classes. Participants consist of 70% female ( $n = 211$ ) and 30% male ( $n = 90$ ). The ethnic distribution of the sample is as follows: 76.6% White, 12.7% Asian, 6.2% African American, 2.4% Hispanic and 2.1% other. The mean age of the college students is 20. Each student received regular class credit by the instructor for participation in the study (neither of the primary researchers serve as the instructor of these classes). The data collection process took approximately 25 minutes for the introductory classes to complete the survey.

### *Survey Instrument*

There are few inventories that specifically examine perceptions of athleticism, thus the need for the AAAAB instrument (Harrison *et al.*, in press). The survey instrument contains 53 items. Forty-five items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale. The responses were coded as follows: 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neutral, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree. There are two semi-structured questions and six demographic and control items. Reliabilities were determined for the items and alpha levels were obtained. While not the focus of the present study, the items measured students' perceptions of athletes in terms of race on four general levels:

- (1) athletes achieve at sports because of hard work (23 items = 0.98);
- (2) athletes achieve at sports because of natural ability (12 items = 0.97);
- (3) athletes achieve at sports because they are physically better than others (two items = 0.91); and
- (4) athletes achieve at sports because they are mentally better than others (two items = 0.88)

The AAAAB instrument (Harrison *et al.*, in press) was developed to qualitatively and quantitatively determine those variables that most impact students' perceptions of Black and White athleticism and White athletic inferiority. The scope of the current study qualitatively examines participants' responses to one of the open-ended questions which is listed as follows:

Of all the racial and ethnic groups in sports, African American athletes have been categorized and labeled as 'natural' athletes, meaning they have some superior genetic edge and dominate certain sports (i.e. football, basketball, and track and field). Explain why you agree or disagree with these notions. What are the reasons for African American athletic achievement in certain sports?

### *Data Analysis*

Participants were presented with one open-ended question regarding African American and White American athleticism (listed above) and instructed to offer a response to the question. After the written responses to the question were collected, they were transcribed into a hard copy (text) for data analysis.<sup>2</sup> An investigative team, which consisted of four individuals trained in qualitative research methodology, two of which were the primary researchers, was utilized throughout the data analysis process.

Hierarchical content analysis, as suggested by Patton (1990), was utilized throughout the data analysis process. Following transcription, each investigator read each of the participants' transcripts in order to get a sense of the college students' perceptions. Each investigator independently identified raw-data themes that characterized each participant's response. Raw-data themes are quotes which capture a concept provided by the participant. Then, the investigative team met to discuss the transcripts. The primary purpose of this meeting was to interpret and identify major themes. Raw data themes were utilized to conduct an inductive analysis in order to identify common themes or patterns of greater generality. Themes were derived from all of the transcripts and attempts were made to interpret commonalities among the perceptions described in each of the transcripts (Patton, 2001). Primary researchers identified major themes and subthemes across transcripts and support for each theme was located in each of the transcripts (Patton, 2001).

Finally, utilizing the themes that were previously identified, transcripts were coded and categorized by two trained researchers. Meaning units associated with each theme were identified in each of the transcripts in order to determine the number and percentage of participants that responded within each of the major themes (see Table 1).

## Results

The primary focus of utilizing the open-ended question is to assess participants' perceptions of African American athletic achievement. Seven major themes emerged which are descriptive of the participants' ( $n = 301$ ) perceptions, thoughts, and feelings concerning the debate of African American athleticism: *Black physical advantage*, *Black work ethic*, *Black cultural factors*, *race disregard*, *societal factors*, *Black limited opportunity*, and *unawareness/X factor*. The following section will outline the specific themes and subthemes and give direct quotes from the participants' responses.

### *Black Physical Advantage*

The first theme, *Black physical advantage*, describes participants' responses which use genetics and natural ability to explain African American athletes dominance in certain sports (football, basketball, and track). The theme of *Black physical advantage* is comprised of three subthemes: *biology/genetics*, *history/evolution*, and *body/muscle structure*. The subtheme of *biology/genetics* suggests that the African American athletes have superior physical genes and traits. The subtheme of *history/evolution* attributes Black athletic excellence to historical conditions. The subtheme of *body/muscle structure* suggests that Black athletes are successful due to the build and muscle structure of their bodies. Participants express the significance of 'God-given' talent in regards to athleticism; consider this example from a participant:

Absolutely. People are afraid to say it because they think it will come off as racist but the key is Blacks are better athletes than Whites. It doesn't mean he does not work just as hard to develop their talents and it doesn't mean they are any less capable mentally, but what truly separates them is their God-given physical ability: the numbers don't lie; now many say Black players are in the NBA as compared to Whites. The same can be said for the NFL. (157)

TABLE 1. Major themes: descriptive percentages of transcripts ( $N=301$ ) (all themes are included to demonstrate objectivity and not truncate the major narratives versus the outlier themes)

Theme	$N$	Percentage	Quotes
Black physical advantage	75	25%	I agree that many African Americans are blessed with the ability to play sports and have a number of skills. If people bring genetics into this situation—African Americans may be taller or bigger and have an advantage in the sports category.
Black work ethic	72	24%	I disagree with these notions. I think the reasons for African American athletic achievement are: drive, commitment and interest.
Black cultural factors	57	19%	I disagree with this stereotype. I think it is completely culturally biased. We label certain sports as ‘White sports’, ‘Black sports’, ‘wealthy/elitist sports’ and ‘common sports’. For each race, I think there is a designated ‘coolness’ attributed to each sport ... which is masculine, which is for the elite ... it all effects the decision.
Race disregard	41	14%	I don’t think that it’s correct to label a particular race as ‘natural’ athletes. I’m not sure if African Americans are necessarily better at certain sports despite their large numbers in them (i.e. basketball, football, etc.). There are no specific reasons for African Americans athletic achievement in certain sports. That is like asking, ‘Why is Julie so smart?’ It’s a dumb question. Certain people are blessed with certain talents.
Societal factors	33	11%	African Americans athletic achievement is due to the encouragement they receive from others and promise of rewards and (better) opportunities (e.g. college education) that can come through athletic achievement.
Black limited opportunity	27	9%	Historically, African Americans were restricted from certain activities. They were allowed to participate in such things as boxing in order to be entertaining for the majority group in society. Blacks were not allowed to play many sports for several years because of the discrimination in the American society. It was necessary for those who wanted to play to show that they were extremely good at the sport. This high standard has continued throughout history into today.
Unawareness/X factor	27	9%	I disagree, but I don’t know why they succeed in certain sports—maybe we just see them more because of media coverage.

*Note:* Please keep in mind that participants wrote anywhere from two to three sentence responses to an entire paragraph. Each of the responses included several key concepts that coincide with the studies seven major themes. Very few participants’ responses exclusively coincided with only one theme.

An African American participant explains the differences between races by history:

I believe it’s because of our history—we’ve never had anything delivered to us on a silver spoon. We work hard everyday in the struggle therefore there’s more of a mean to strive for the ‘good life’. (130)

Many of the participants attribute African American athleticism to their muscles and bodies, as the following comments illustrate:

I think it definitely seems as though a lot of African American athletes have natural athletic builds—growing taller, having leaner muscles, etc. (222)

African Americans muscles and bodies are slightly different allowing them to run faster and such. (59)

Blacks in general I think are ‘given’ a natural talent for athleticism. (218)

Twenty-five percent (75/301) of participants list at least one of the following factors: biology, genetics, history, evolution, body, and/or muscle structure (see Table 1). These comments are interesting when considering that approximately 99% of the anatomical structure is the same and that out of 17 genes, there are more differences and variation within the races than between them (Vandermeer, 1996).

### *Black Work Ethic*

The second theme, *Black work ethic*, is comprised of three subthemes: *practice*, *effort*, and *dedication*. The subtheme of *practice* suggests that Black athletes practice more hours than their White counterparts. The subtheme of *effort* demonstrates the Black athlete has determination and works hard. The subtheme of *dedication* consists of African American athletes’ commitment to athletics. Black athletes’ sheer determination and hard work is described by one participant,

A lot of success, historically are attributed to dedication and hard work. While many Black athletes have come from under-privileged poor families. They have fought more racial barriers to be where they are today. For some Blacks, athletics isn’t their gift. For others, it is a way of life, playing pickup games on concrete urban playgrounds. Much of Black progress has been in professional sports. Give credit to their hard work and perseverance. (247)

Another participant expresses African American athletes tendency to practice long hours.

There may be more Blacks in some sports because they practice more or because they play more as children. (224)

Participants recognize African American athletes strong work ethic, as the following comment illustrates:

Yes, some White athletes are inferior in certain sports, not because of their color, but because of their lack of hard work in that sport. African Americans work very hard and therefore succeed in that sport. (105)

The following participant attributes Black athletic superiority to dedication.

I disagree. They try hard at the sports they play. The reason that they achieve is due to their dedication. (245)

Twenty-four percent (72/301) of the participants mention work ethic in their explanation of the difference between European American and African American athletes’ abilities and successes (see Table 1). To date, there has been no investigation beyond anecdotal evidence of time investment by athletes and how that leads to superior athletic performance. This is a research question that should control for race, class, and gender, due to the fact that the present participants express these constructs in their responses.

### *Black Cultural Factors*

The third theme, *Black cultural factors*, involves participants' thoughts that African American athleticism is due to environmental and cultural factors. The theme of *Black cultural factors* is comprised of three subthemes: *Black focus/dreams*, *Black ticket out*, and *Black family/community*. The subtheme of *Black focus/dreams* suggests that African American athletes have 'hoop dreams' (Sailes, 1998). The subtheme of *Black ticket out* consists of the idea that African Americans use sport to get out of poverty. The subtheme of *family/community* involves how Black athletes are encouraged by their families to play certain sports. One participant expresses the idea that African Americans have dreams surrounding their success in sports.

I think 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, whereas Whites don't really have that need. So we see a larger amount of African Americans in urban sports like basketball. (221)

Some participants express the notion that Blacks utilize sports to pave their way out of poverty.

I disagree. They excel cause usually lower socio-economic are, and is only way out. May work harder. (1)

I think achievement is due to attitudes—many African Americans who happen to be living in lower income neighborhood might see sports as a way to lots of money and a way out. The Black role models they see are Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, so they might want to emulate those figures they see people like them have been able to achieve in that area. (177)

The following participant acknowledges family influence and encouragement in the African American community.

I think this is untrue. One possible reason for their high achievement in sports is that their community/family may put more emphasis on that instead of schoolwork. (208)

This theme describes participants' explanation that athletes play certain sports based on their dreams, upward mobility, and family. Nineteen percent (57/301) of the participants recognize the differences of how the various races are raised and cultural distinctions between the two (see Table 1).

### *Race Disregard*

The fourth theme, *race disregard*, depicts participants' claim that there is no evident edge in sport based on race. Participants offer several reasons for athletic prowess among both races (Whites and African Americans). The theme of *race disregard* is comprised of two subthemes: *work ethic* and *talent*. The subtheme of *work ethic* represents participants who attribute athletes success in sports primarily to hard work and time commitment. Participants also attribute athletic success in certain sports (football, basketball, and track and field) to natural talent which is evident in the subtheme *talent*. Participants express that African Americans do not have an advantage over White athletes based on race, as the following comment illustrates:

Notions like 'White man's disease' just add to racism in our society and paint African Americans as savage beast capable of little more than athletics. This

so-called disease is simply untrue. There are plenty of successful athletes of both races. (140)

One participant describes athletic talent regardless of race:

While some people may have natural talent in certain sports, these talents are by no means a product of their race. Rather, the talents could belong to a person of any race. (232)

Participants simply attribute athleticism to the specific factor of hard work regardless of race as the following comments illustrate:

Although body type does play a roll in an athlete's ability, the most important part of an athlete is his dedication. (237)

I think there is also a lot of hard work put into practicing that gets all athletes, African American or White or any other race, to the high level of athletic achievements they have reached. (222)

The following comment describes athletic success to natural talent:

Yes, some African Americans are natural athletes, but then again, some Whites are natural athletes too. I cannot explain why there are more African Americans in football and basketball, and I cannot explain why there are more Whites in hockey and golf. (210)

Participants report that there are excellent athletes in all sports regardless of race. Fourteen percent (41/301) failed to buy into the myths of Black athletic superiority (see Table 1). Ninety percent of all sports have less than 1% of African American participation and presence in their sports (Lapchick, 2001), but the perception still remains that 'Black athletes dominate sports' (Entine, 2000).

### *Societal Factors*

Another theme that emerged from participants' responses was *societal factors*, which holds the society and the media accountable for common societal viewpoints concerning athleticism. The theme of *societal factors* is comprised of three subthemes: *media influence*, *societal encouragement/expectations*, and *stereotypes*. The subtheme of *media influence* involves participants who report that the media is responsible for perpetuating stereotypes concerning African American athleticism. The subtheme *societal encouragement/expectations* attributes athleticism to society's specific expectations. Participants recognize the affect of racial myths and assumed racial differences which is evident in the subtheme of *stereotypes*. The influence of the media is described by one participant:

I feel that the way society perpetuates these stereotypical viewpoints that one race is better than the next. Through this method, the people listening to the media have a higher chance to think these are true. However, I think that the physiognomy of particular individuals are better suited for a specific sport and therefore those who just don't have the same genetic physical make-up. (252)

Some participants express the influence of society's encouragement and expectations that athletes are exposed to; for example one participant stated:

I disagree with these notions. I feel that African Americans are encouraged to practice at these sports and are expected to do well: this is why I feel that they succeed. Not because of natural ability, but because of societal expectations. (291)

The following participants explain how racial stereotyping has influenced people's opinions and expectations:

No, I do not feel White athletes are inferior in sports. I believe the reason people believe that they are is because of racial stereotyping. People have come to believe that Whites should be doctors/lawyers, etc. ... and that African Americans should excel at sports, neither one of these stereotypes reflect true facts. (291)

African Americans seem to be able to achieve higher strength and physical superiority than Whites. My high school gym teacher once said they have different kinds of muscles ('fast-twitch' I think) that enables them to have more explosive speed and strength and that Whites have slow twitch muscles that—give them more endurance. I have no idea if this is accurate—he was a pretty stupid guy—but I think this is a somewhat widely accepted theory. (238)

Some participants (11%, 33/301) acknowledge the influence of society and express the powerful effect that the media and stereotypes can have on perceptions (see Table 1). In terms of race and perception, evidence has been found that Black and Whites see the world differently based on social issues or effigies in cinema that relate to social issues (Alderfer & Smith, 1982; Cooper, 1998; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Hill, 2002).

#### *Black Limited Opportunity*

The sixth theme, *Black limited opportunity*, describes participants' recognition of the lack of resources and opportunities in certain lower class neighborhoods. The theme of *Black limited opportunity* is comprised of three subthemes: *lack of education/resources*, *socioeconomic status*, and *discrimination*. The subtheme of *lack of education/resources* describes participants' recognition of lack of resources and education in certain lower class neighborhoods, often Black neighborhoods. The subtheme of *socioeconomic status* suggests that athleticism is due to class level and family income. The subtheme of *Black discrimination* involves participants who report that African Americans are discriminated against in certain sectors of society. This theme depicts the relevance of opportunities towards athletic participation. Consider this example from a participant:

No: I think 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. Sometimes, it has a lot to do with the neighborhoods people grow up in. Not every neighborhood has a golf course and not every neighborhood has a frozen pond or skating rink. (18)

Another participant acknowledges the lack of education for some Black individuals:

Sometimes Blacks see sports as their only way of getting out of 'the hood', sadly to say. People don't always have the same opportunities education wise, either, so sports might just be the only way some Blacks can see themselves going to college. (236)

This participant realizes the significance of socioeconomic status:

Also, some minorities grow up in low socioeconomic areas (along with Whites) but more in minority groups and sports tend to be what they do instead of joining gangs or school. Opposite goes for Whites. Many Whites are middle/upper class. They are raised to focus more on school and not sports, so they

don't practice sports as much (hard work), so they're just isn't as many Whites in some of these sports. (114)

The following participant acknowledges institutional discrimination in society toward African Americans:

Disagree, African Americans' achievement should be given the credit it deserves, but I think it has largely to do with the fact that they are not allowed to succeed in other contexts of life as easily as Whites. Sports can be an outlet, or they can be one of the few fields where they are not discriminated against (in terms of finding a position). (227)

Nine percent (27/301) of the participants recognize the differences in opportunity between the races, affirming social policy discrimination research by scholars on urban demography (see Table 1) (Wilson, 1996; Kelley, 1997).

#### *Unawareness/X Factor*

The final theme of *unawareness/X factor* is a theme that emerged based on the tendency for participants to simply admit that they did not know the answer. This theme did not include any subthemes. The following responses are representative of this theme:

I disagree, I'm not sure why African Americans dominate certain sport just like I don't know why Whites achieve at other sports. (6)

I don't know if these statements are true. (42)

I don't know if it has been scientifically proven that Blacks, if more so than Whites are natural athletes. (146)

The following participant seems to express the 'X factor', in terms of not knowing what the variable is or is not in terms of certain groups dominating particular sports:

I do not know that much about African Americans' genetic abilities or if they are better at sports than other races. Therefore I don't know for sure if I agree or disagree. I would have to say, however that I would like to disagree. I think that there are a lot of African Americans in sport mainly due to the fact that perhaps they had more exposure to sports as kids than other races. Or maybe they are very dedicated. I do not really know why they have such high achievement, though. (205)

These quotes suggest that some people (9%, 27/301) are open to being educated about this topic, and that curricular diversity with controversial issues such as the present one could prove positive for informing and shaping views (see Table 1) (Hooks, 1994). These quotes also affirm what some scholars have suggested and the empirical data indicates: that no one knows 'why' African American athletes dominate a few sports (Coakley, 2001). The discussion section that follows will enable the researchers to engage in a more in-depth synthesis of what the findings mean and imply.

## **Discussion**

In regards to the theme of *Black physical advantage*, participants attribute African American athleticism to 'God-given' genes, Darwinian evolution, and muscular structure. The display of excellence in basketball, football, and track and field by Black athletes has led

these college students to believe Blacks have superior genetic traits. One participant even went so far as to say that African Americans are the chosen race:

African American athletic achievement in certain sports can be attributed to hard work, motivation, and their place as the chosen race by God for hot slam-dunking action. (229)

The physiological literature with reference to race differences was reviewed by Hunter (1998) and Harpalani (1998). Both scholars concluded that the quantitative studies of physiological differences between the races report relatively small differences and do not account for the racial disparity observed in the major sports. Furthermore, small differences in anatomy, physiology, genetics, or biomechanics are not necessarily analogous to superior sport performance (Harrison, 2001). Participant responses as presented in the Results section (*Black physical advantage* theme) focus on various Black body parts such as shorter tendons, longer femurs, higher levels of testosterone, and more 'fast-twitch' muscles. Miller (1998) also claimed the focus on the body when contemplating differences as his following quote illustrates:

With regard to the historical construction of racial categories, moreover, we ought to consider that even if many social commentators argue that the most significant debate today concerns the ways test scores or the reification of diverse cultural stances can be used to fold, bend, spindle, and mutilate existing public policy, the *body* continues to loom large in many people's thinking about difference. Indeed, the highlights of TV sports reports often provide the most obvious, vivid markers of distinctions associated with race and ethnicity. (p. 124)

Carrington (2002) continues to highlight the focus on the body. He explains how the media focuses on Black bodies and faces in their representation of athletes, entertainers, and musicians.

Many scientists have arrived at a variety of explanations for athleticism. For example, Coetzer *et al.* (1993) found that the major determining factor among those assessed was in training intensities between Black and White runners. Astrand and Rodahl (1986) recognize that natural endowment (genetic factor) plays a major role in performance capacity but conclude that the most important factor that determines the individuals' response to training is their ability to be highly motivated. Findings such as these lead to the idea that work ethic plays a significant role in athletic excellence.

The theme of *Black work ethic* demonstrates that participants attribute Black excellence in certain sports to long practice hours, determination, and dedication. Even with evidence that support the idea of work ethic and mental excellence (Harrison *et al.*, in press), the racial ideology that exists today often celebrates the 'natural' athlete myth. The results of the Harrison *et al.* study (in press) support the theme of *Black work ethic* in the current study. Harrison *et al.* utilized a survey and assessed college students' perceptions of race, athletic ability, and achievement. The investigators found that on average (based on Likert scale) African American students *strongly agreed* with the statement that African Americans succeed at sports because of hard work while White students reported that they *agreed* with this statement. Dr. Alvin Poussaint, a psychiatrist at Harvard, addressed the issue of Black athleticism and claimed that Black athletes simply work harder in this lengthy but salient quote:

In some Whites there is an unwillingness to face the fact that Black athletes work harder. Throughout the years of discrimination, Blacks began to see sport

as survival. You do what you've been trained to do. But along the way, the traits which made (them) able to excel at sports—mental acuity, mental concentration, mental toughness, work ethic—the very traits which Blacks weren't supposed to have and supposedly were the reason to keep them out of sports in the first place, now those traits are given little or no credence. Why don't we look at the mental work within sport? If the attitude of the majority and minority was more open, more Blacks would become mathematicians and scientists. Right now, it's a matter of self-fulfilling prophecy. (Pouissant, cited in Wiley, 1991, p. 186)

According to Tucker (1994), the transformation of racial ideology, very much steeped in political and social forces, causes most people to disregard work ethic and mental prowess. Today, the justification for African Americans outperforming Whites in a few sports (football, basketball, track, boxing) has produced rhetoric and societal discourse that African Americans are physically superior, but mentally inferior. Any athletic talent or prowess is present because of God-given talents and 'natural' abilities, not personal industry or cognitive and psychomotor mastery of athletic techniques (Robeson, 1919).

In the theme *Black cultural factors*, participants attribute athleticism to specific facets of Black culture such as dreams, ticket out of poverty, and family influence. African American cultural influences on their athletic expression are best explained when sociopolitical influences are considered which involves societal influence and limits in opportunity (Gilroy, 2000). Evidence is building in the debate of the 'natural' athlete that supports variables of political, social, historical, ideological, and cultural strife being much more significant than the biological category of race.

The consideration of cultural factors has been supported by the some physiologists who claimed to properly assess and determine the physiological capacity between ethnic groups, one must consider the fact that there are very different modes of life, nutritional backgrounds, and state of physical training between, as well as within, each ethnic group (Hunter, 1998; Proctor, 1999). The way in which individuals live, what foods they eat, and which training methods they adopt are usually based on cultural factors and can have a significant impact on athletic success. Performance is not based upon a specific workout, a single technique, a feature of anatomy, or a unique trait of physiology. Instead, it is a complex accumulation from multiple experiences drawn from our culture, society, history, and geographic location (Proctor, 1999).

The major theme of *race disregard* involved participants who completely disregarded the issue of race in their responses. Participants specifically state race does not have anything to do with it. For these participants race does not matter in determining individual physical feats or athletic performance. Athleticism can be attained by anyone through a variety of avenues, hard work, natural talent, dedication, and determination. The Harrison *et al.* (in press) study parallels the current study again through the following two findings: (a) students tended to agree or agree strongly with the statement that athletes succeed at their particular sport because of hard work; and (b) on average students disagreed with the items that stated that athletes of one race achieved because they were mentally or physically better than another race. These researchers concluded that work, which is the result of motivation, is the key component for performance levels above and beyond the average.

The following results of the Harrison *et al.* (in press) study also coincide with the subtheme of *media influence* and the major theme of *Black physical advantage* in the current study. Participants report that the media is responsible for perpetuating stereotypes

concerning African American athleticism. And many of these stereotypes surround the notion that African Americans have some type of physical advantage over White Americans. Harrison *et al.* found students who watched three or more hours of TV a day in college were more likely to agree with the statement that 'African Americans achieve at football because of natural ability. They also found White students who watched three or more hours of TV in college were more likely to agree with the statement that 'basketball is mostly African American because Blacks are physically better than Whites'.

As Carrington (2002) notes, 'Mainstream media culture is dominated by Black faces and bodies, from the sports fields and fashion catwalks, to our cinematic screens and music video channels, and even (occasionally) within the high cultural spaces of award ceremonies for novelistic and avant-garde artistic production' (p. 1). Research consistently infers that media still portray African Americans inaccurately and stereotypically (Rainville & McCormick, 1977; Murrell & Curtis, 1994; Rada, 1996). All three of these aforementioned studies confirm stagnant beliefs about Blacks: they are athletic but not intelligent; possess animal and not human characteristics; and lack positive character traits. As participants have demonstrated, culturally-based ideas about skin color influence perceptions in the debate of athleticism (Coakley, 2001). Individuals gain these ideas not only from their cultural group but also from their exposure to the media.

Historically, unequal and separate societies were created and reinforced by the mainstream media. On television, the characterizations of Black communities as excellent in athletic performance are highly representative. This is coupled with the absence of Blacks in roles of excellence in other professions (Hoberman, 1997), which serves to recreate and support the myth of genetic predisposition to high levels of athletic performance rather than attributing performance to high levels of hard work. In the long run, this has channeled Black youth into sport and away from intellectual pursuit, which is needed to achieve excellence in our society. This channeling of Black youth has created powerful stereotypes about African Americans (Wiley, 1991; Hoberman, 1997).

The subtheme of *stereotypes* emerged in the present study in which participants recognize the affect of racial myths and assumed racial differences. In the participants' quotes they explain how racial stereotyping has influenced people's opinions, expectations, and perceptions. Harrison (1999) surveyed 200 college students enrolled in the physical education activity program at a southeastern regional university in the United States. Respondents overwhelmingly indicated that certain racial groups were more likely to participate in particular sports and physical activities. Harrison (1999) also concluded, 'That most subjects, regardless of race, indicated that racial groups were better in sport activities that generally have been stereotyped for that group. It is interesting but ambiguous as to why African American subjects indicate European Americans are better at activities where little or no African American presence appears' (p. 8). Harrison's study parallels the current one by utilizing college students as well.

The subtheme of *stereotypes* also supports Hoberman's (1997) claim that society's infatuation with Black athleticism perpetuates the negative stereotype that Blacks are physically superior and intellectually inferior compared to Whites. He argues that African Americans are entrapped by the world of athleticism which involves Blacks seeking respect and opportunity and Whites seeking entertainment and profit. Both White Americans and African Americans are discouraged from challenging fundamental assumptions about racial difference, thus both tend to accept the idea of Black athletic superiority. A great example of a stereotype being reiterated and perpetuated is when Entine (2000) concluded his book with the following remark: 'White men can't jump'

(p. 341). These types of remarks and labels reinforce racism and perpetuate the myth of the 'natural' Black athlete, rather than destroying it (Coakley, 1999).

The first research question in the current study addresses whether college students believe in Black athletic superiority. Some college students do buy into the notion of the 'natural' Black athlete. This is evident in the theme of *Black physical advantage* and in the subtheme of *Black physical attributes* in which participants report that African Americans have a superior gene, an extra muscle, a longer femur, and are given these attributes by God. Clearly, participants are finding race to be a significant factor in athletic prowess.

The second question involves which factors college students attribute to successful athletic performance. College students in the current study attribute athletic excellence in certain sports (basketball, football, and track and field) to a variety of following factors: (a) genetics; (b) history; (c) evolution; (d) muscle structure; (e) work ethic; (f) culture; (g) dreams; (h) family; (i) natural talent; (k) media stereotypes; (l) opportunity; and (m) encouragement. Many of the participants attribute athleticism to a combination of these factors. Few participants attribute it only to one factor.

The final question addresses whether college students think that race has an influence on athletic performance. Some participants, which is evident in the theme *race disregard*, report that race is to be disregarded and any individuals that have work ethic and talent can be successful in athletics. However, on the other hand, there were plenty of participants as mentioned earlier that seem to buy into the idea of racially superior genes. These participants attribute excellent athletic performance to race and they strongly believe that African Americans have an advantage over White athletes in certain sports.

The myth of the 'natural' athlete, Black athletic superiority, or White athletic inferiority (whatever the preference of terminology is), still exists today, the irony being that African Americans have been historically excluded from competing in sport due to beliefs of their athletic *inferiority*. Carrington (2002) concludes that it is evident that colonial myths about Black power have been most clearly expressed in the discourse of the 'tough' Black athlete making the *athletic Black body* a key repository for contemporary desires and fears about Blackness. The power of the media, cultural stereotypes, myths, and lack of knowledge have perpetuated beliefs of a superior athletic gene that African Americans possess. Numerous public individuals and groups have internalized these myths about attributes in sport and have done little to challenge their assumptions. Who or what should be the impetus for the public to challenge and possibly even change their views of stereotyping African American and White American athletes?

## Conclusions and Future Implications

### *Limitations*

The current study was not randomly assigned and had significantly more women than men. People of color were also minimized in the participant sample. Irrespective of these shortcomings, the researchers feel that the current study may suggest a pattern of thinking and the racial knowledge that exist in American culture about Black athletes. Further, the demographics of the participants reflect the population trends of women in higher education in terms of increasing their presence in undergraduate and graduate education (Coleman, 1996).

The dearth of underrepresented ethnic groups in the current study reflects the ethnic representations on many predominantly White campuses. C.K. Harrison *et al.* (2002) found that in another investigation with a large communication class at the same

institution in the current study, many of the students come from the suburbs, several African American students from large cities, and many White American students grew up in neighborhoods with little diversity and attended high schools with few people of color, especially African Americans. This lack of integration supports Allport's (1954) argument mentioned earlier in regards to the contact hypothesis theory.

### *Recommendations*

Research is lacking in terms of qualitative and quantitative inquiry into Black athletes and their feelings, attitudes, and experiences about this issue, including their training methods from childhood to adulthood to achieve in sports (Lowrence, 2001; L. Harrison *et al.*, 2002). In short, Blacks do not dominate sports; they dominate a few sports that have allowed them to compete.

The researchers see the need to pose a few significant questions. Is society afraid to attribute African American achievement to the environment, hard work, and lack of opportunities in the broader societal context and how do myths and pseudo-science affirm status quo beliefs about racist ideology? This progressive framing would move the debate forward, and the investigation of why White males exist and 'dominate' Fortune 500 companies, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) positions, front office positions, and the like would surface in terms of genetic rhetoric and 'natural' athlete propaganda (Harrison, 2000 a,b). Why are there no genetic theories recycled about White overrepresentation in boardrooms paralleling the overrepresentation of Blacks in gyms and gridirons?

In conclusion, it appears that the myth of the 'natural' Black athlete is another social excuse, both convenient and political, to attach notions, inferences, and connotations to an ethnic heritage and population that has historically been oppressed, ostracized, and exploited (Gilroy, 2000). It seems unimaginable that at the turn of the twenty-first century, African Americans are still perceived to be both sub- and super-human. This reflex and tendency to stereotype African American achievement and excellence must continue to be challenged in various scholarly disciplines and public discourses. There is a need for scholarship, as Coakley (1999) stated, that 'Destroys the myth of the natural Black athlete' (p. 4). In the final analysis, the biologist and anthropologist consider race to be a social construction and a distant category of the past when examining human behavior. Clearly, many of the college students in this study use race not only as a conduit but as a necessary cognitive process to understand African American athleticism.

One way to challenge students' views is class dialogue. Scientifically, the empirical data should be presented which examine both sides of this issue, historically and contemporary. Demonstrate to students how stereotypes and stigmas are developed in the culture by utilizing the contact hypothesis theory which transforms these views. Essentially, humanize deep-seated and engrained beliefs. Challenge the students with various literature, data, and research on the subject. The course content must be interdisciplinary: anatomy, physiology, biology, history, sociology, sport management, physical education, movement science, and art must address the issue of race and athleticism. Pedagogically, hooks' approach (1994) of teaching to transgress and lifelong critical thinking of these timely issues may cultivate a change in attitudes. Techniques and strategies in class that challenge racism and not individuals as racist would be a healthy design. College students' perceptions, myths, and stereotypes about African American athleticism are a mere microcosm and vessel to the larger society's attitudes and beliefs about this timely issue.

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### Notes

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- [2] All narratives by the respondents are transcribed verbatim, irrespective of grammatical syntax.

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