

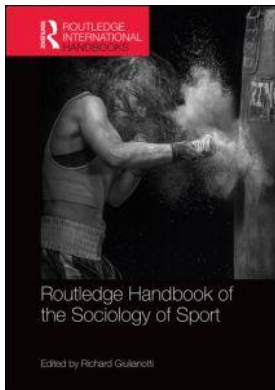
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RACE AND SPORT

Earl Smith and Angela J. Hattery

Introduction

Race matters (Feagin 2013; West 2000). Race impacts virtually every aspect of our lives, from the opportunities we have to attend higher education, our access to health care, the foods we eat, the likelihood that we will go to prison and the sports that we play.

In this essay, we examine the centrality of race to sport. We begin with a discussion of race as it is defined by scholars; we then identify several key 'themes' that illustrate the ways that race and racism appear in sports, followed by a focussed discussion of the experiences of African Americans in the US. We conclude with recommendations for addressing the kinds of racism that exist in SportsWorld.¹

Definitions of race

As sociologists, we understand race to be socially constructed, which we illustrate with our examples below. In contrast, *ethnicity* describes one's cultural background and refers to behaviours such as religious practices, food preferences and language. Most people use the term *race* to refer to inherited physical characteristics like skin complexion, the shape of our nose, eyes, hair texture and hair colour. Furthermore, people commonly use the term *race* to refer to these physical traits as if they are always inherited and consistent (e.g. 'white' people always have light complexions or Asians always have eyelids with no folds). These assumptions reflect a collective ignorance about race; indeed, they have made naked fools of us. Why? The reasons for this ignorance return us to the sociological fact that race is a social construct. Simply put, there is *no coherent, fixed definition of race*, nor is there a single 'race gene' (Garcia 2007: 2) that can be specified as a basis for biological distinction – or, much less, is there such a gene that establishes a scientific basis for ranking different groups into hierarchies (Lombardo 2011) – or for explaining athletic performance. That said, across the world, an athlete's 'race' and their 'ethnicity' become important for a variety of reasons, not least of which is how they are treated within the sports they play.

Based on these assertions, sociologists, legal scholars and others argue that *race is a social construction*; it exists only through social interaction and by the behaviours of social actors; as such, we, as individuals but more importantly as a society, are forced to construct and reconstruct its abstract significance.

The legal scholar Lopez (2000) provides a case study of the social construction of race using his own 'mixed race' family wherein his brother 'chooses' to be White (as does his father) and he chooses to be non-White (as does his mother, who is Hispanic). In providing this portrait, Lopez concludes that, 'in my experience race reveals itself as plastic, inconstant, and to some extent volitional' (2000: 166).

Furthermore, as he states:

I understand race as a mutable social construction that has been used historically to classify and stratify people based on clusters of physical characteristics. Race is defined by and against whiteness, an unmarked, invisible, and unexamined category that strategically has 'a touchstone quality of the normal, against which members of marked categories are defined', so that all members of marked categories possess race in ways that whites do not.

(2000:144)

As Lopez alludes to, race is socially constructed, specifically for political purposes; and, in the US, access to many social, economic, political, educational and occupational institutions have been and often continue to be limited by race and racial identity.

We might also note the particular and peculiar history of classifying African Americans and other 'races' in the American Decennial Census (Prewitt 2013). For example, in the 1860 census, there were three racial categories: 'white', 'negro' and 'mulatto.' Immediately following the US Civil War, a special census was taken in 1865; those who identified as 'negro' or 'mulatto' were asked again to confirm their racial identity. Part of the purpose of this special census was to offer 'negroes' a chance to be 'returned' to Africa. Never mind the fact that only a small percentage of 'negroes' living in the US at that time had ever been to Africa, as most had been born in the US. The category 'mulatto' disappeared in both terminology and popular usage until 2000.

In the 2000 census, for the first time since the mid-1800s, individuals could choose more than one race. In response, approximately 13% of the US population identified as multi-racial, or deriving from more than one 'racial' category. The 2000 census was also important because it moved the designation 'Hispanic' out of the set of racial categories and into a special designation of 'ethnicity'. Interestingly 'Hispanic' is the *only* ethnic category in the US Census. Providing an illustration relevant to sports of how this single change impacted Hispanics, imagine the position of Dominican baseball players such as Sammy Sosa or Albert Pujols. According to the 1990 census, both men were classified racially as 'Hispanic'; in 2000 and 2010, they had lost that particular racial identity but acquired a new ethnicity. Racially, in the later censuses, they would have to choose to be either White or Black (or Asian/Pacific Islander or Native American/Native Alaskan) and their ethnicity would be designated as 'Hispanic'.

Each man was the same person in 1990 and 2000. The traits we identify as 'racial' – skin tone, hair texture, facial features – did not change, but their racial identity did! Not surprisingly, in 2000 the majority of 'Hispanics' left the racial category blank. It didn't make sense to them that they were anything other than 'Hispanic'. These examples from the census and from Lopez highlight how race is socially constructed. They also demonstrate how the idea of race is very vaguely defined, and subject to major changes over time (Lopez 2000; Prewitt 2013).

Themes at the intersection of race and SportsWorld

From birth to death the racial or ethnic classification of the individual has direct impacts upon his or her station in life (Smith 2014). Here, we examine some of the ways in which race impacts

sport (Fields 1990). To the casual observer, sport represents a level playing field, one in which talent trumps race and even gender. For the scholar of the sociology of sport, the research shows that this is still not the case.

Here we explore two 'themes' in the intersections of race and sport. Specifically, we examine 'exclusion' and 'individual and group level aggression'. Many of our examples in sport are drawn from the particular and peculiar experiences of African Americans in the US. That said, the US has not by any means limited discrimination to just African Americans and thus we include the experiences of other racial/ethnic groups.

Exclusion

As much of my (Smith's) previous research has demonstrated, race and sports are intertwined in many ways in the United States; for example, race shapes access to sports, the 'stacking' of athletes into specific playing positions and coaching opportunities, to list only a few issues (Smith 2014).

In order to best understand the origins of the exclusion of African Americans from various sporting activities, it is instructive to examine the logics that Whites have used to justify these barriers. As we shall see in subsequent examples, Whites applied the same process of 'logical explanation' to justify the exclusion or differential treatment of others as well.

Race has impacted sports participation of African Americans in two fundamental ways: (1) by restricting, either formally or informally, the sports they could participate in, and (2) by shaping the ideological beliefs about African Americans' intellectual and physical abilities in terms of sport participation and post-sport experiences.

The hegemonic ideological beliefs about African Americans – as lazy, shiftless and dumb – have been relatively stable over several centuries. These stereotypes have traction not only among 'rednecks' – a self-identified group of mostly rural, southern Whites who espouse allegiance to the Confederate flag – but by educated White males like Arthur Jensen, an educational psychologist from the University of California at Berkeley, who argued in a 1969 *Harvard Education Review* article, without credible evidence, that Whites were intellectually superior to African Americans. Another educated White male, William Shockley, winner of the 1956 Nobel Prize in Physics for co-inventing the transistor, made claims during a lecture to the National Academy of Sciences that the United States had a 'Negro problem'. Shockley claimed that 'Negroes' were reproducing in greater numbers than 'Caucasians', thus lowering the average intelligence of the American population; he concluded that African Americans should be sterilized to prevent further reproduction of 'defective children'. A good portion of Shockley's views on race, IQ and genetics appears in newspapers and magazines that support these far right perspectives.² These ideological beliefs played out in strange ways, such as by preventing African Americans from fighting in World Wars I and II, and from playing in certain positions in American sports.

Ideological beliefs about African Americans lacking intellectual acumen were expanded to incorporate further assumptions about hyper-sexuality and cowardice in warfare. In terms of restricting access to sports, there were commonly held beliefs that African Americans could not swim because they had 'fixed ankles' – which proved to be a comfortable excuse for keeping African Americans out of White swimming pools (Smith 2014) – as well as beliefs that were a direct outgrowth of stereotypes describing African Americans as unintelligent. The latter belief was a powerful tool in positional segregation in sports like baseball and American football. In short, the belief was that in a tight, competitive game – where control of the outcome lies firmly and exclusively with the quarterback or pitcher – African Americans could not make the intellectual decisions needed to secure victories (Smith and Henderson 2000; Smith and

Leonard 1997, Smith and Seff 1990). This is a similar 'logic' to the belief that African Americans would not, when confronted by the threat of an enemy in wartime, be able to make quick and intelligent decisions. As a result, Whites did not want African Americans fighting alongside them in their platoons because they perceived their mere presence as compromising their (Whites') safety.

These beliefs were around in American society in general and in SportsWorld in particular for most of the twentieth century; they may have since abated but are not entirely gone. Nor were (are) these racist beliefs and practices limited to characterizing African Americans in sports. For example, Peter Levine (1992) details the travails of the Jewish athlete in the United States, particularly second-generation migrants in the 1920s and 1930s. While Jews used sports to strengthen their ethnic pride and to ease assimilation into American culture, sports were also seen as a strategy for advancing their social mobility. Yet ironies abound. For the 1936 Berlin Olympics, two top Jewish athletes – Marty Glickman and Sam Stoller – earned places on the United States' 4 × 110 yard men's relay team and traveled to Germany to compete. Prior to the finals, US Olympic Committee Chairman Avery Brundage, a terrifying anti-Semite, and coach Dean Cromwell removed both athletes from the relay team (Levine 1992). Ironically, the replacement athletes were African Americans: Jesse Owens (who would win four gold medals) and Ralph Metcalfe.

Karabel (2005) explains the wider historical context of anti-Semitism in American higher education, which in turn blocked access to sports for young Jewish people (mostly men, as women were largely excluded from participating in intercollegiate sport regardless of their race or ethnic identity) simply because of the interconnectedness of intercollegiate sport in the overall US system of sport. All of the 'Ivy League' colleges, including Harvard, Princeton and Yale, held restrictive policies (implicit and explicit) on the admission of Jews. This, the reader will note, is very similar to the blocked access that African American student-athletes faced in the segregated southern states of the US.

Despite being denied entry to institutions of higher education and thereby access to one venue for developing as an athlete, great Jewish sports stars like Hank Greenberg (baseball), known affectionately as 'The Hebrew Hammer', did emerge. There were many other Jewish athletes who were highly successful during the interwar period, especially in boxing (Levine 1992). A defining moment for Jewish athletes took place in major league baseball in 1965, when Brooklyn Dodgers pitcher Sandy Koufax refused to pitch in Game One of the World Series because it was Yom Kippur, a Jewish holy day. Today there does not seem to be outward animosity towards Jewish athletes, but that is not to say anti-Semitism has ceased to exist.

Individual and group level aggression

Exclusion, as illustrated above, though it can be perpetrated by individuals – the coach who won't put a Black player at quarterback, the team owner who refused to hire a non-White coach – has the greatest impact when it is structural, such as when there is a quota or exclusion system for Jews or African Americans, as occurred with regard to American colleges and universities. We turn now to the kind of racism that readers are more likely familiar with: individual and group aggression. Though the overall impact here is actually much less significant because it involves individuals rather than entire populations, the stories are powerful and their personal impact on individual athletes is demonstrably profound. In many ways, these incidents are disconcerting insights into the wider racial climate and thus are worthy of discussion.

One initial, brief example is provided by one of the most dominant college and professional basketball players in the 1980s and 1990s, Patrick Ewing. Standing 7 feet tall and weighing

240 pounds, Ewing has incredible stature and was one of the first players to bring the current high levels of physicality to the men's basketball game. As an African American, and an extremely powerful and dominant man, he was a constant target for individual and group racial aggressions. His case illustrates not only the pervasiveness and content of the typical racism that African American athletes experience, but also highlights the fear that scholars like Orlando Patterson (1999) claim undergirds much of White male racism, a fear of the power of African American men.

While playing for Georgetown University, Ewing was a 'chief target' for racist abuse by fans. It was not uncommon for fans of opposing teams to hold up signs that said things like: 'Ewing Can't Read' or 'Ewing Kan't Read Dis'. These signs not only invoke the stereotype of African Americans as dumb, but they are particularly powerful in light of the fact that Georgetown University is among the elite academic institutions in the US. Thus, accusing Ewing of not being able to read was an indictment of Georgetown in allegedly treating an African American student athlete differently than the rest of the student body; the implication was that he was admitted for his skills on the court despite his *assumed* intellectual inferiority.

As our next, much more detailed example demonstrates, African American men are not the only targets of individual and group racial aggression; nor is basketball, where they make up approximately 80% of the top-flight NBA, the only arena for such abusive behaviour.

One of the best examples we can provide of this type of individual and group racial aggression is the abuse routinely thrown at Venus and Serena Williams, who have dominated women's tennis internationally for more than a decade. In the twenty-first century, one of the Williams sisters has won the Wimbledon women's singles title in 10 of the first 13 tournaments. In February 2015 Serena Williams won the Austrian Open, and in doing so she passes Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova to become third in the list of women's grand slam tennis championships. To say they have been dominant is an understatement. Yet, their success is even more impressive when one learns of the very painful racism they have experienced at the hands of tennis fans, including the parents of other players, as well as other women on the professional tour. The impact of these acts of individual and group racial aggression is perhaps best demonstrated by their collective decision to boycott Indian Wells, California, after their well-documented experiences in 2001, when they endured racist taunting and booing while on the court and in the stands. Their father, Richard Williams, and their mother, Oracene Price, very publicly discussed the individual and group aggressions that they witnessed against their daughters and themselves, as parents. Richard accused the crowd at Indian Wells of overt racism, stating, 'The white people at Indian Wells, what they've been wanting to say all along to us finally came out: "Nigger, stay away from here, we don't want you here"'. Venus Williams underscored his charge saying: 'I heard what he heard.' Oracene drew parallels with the tennis crowd and the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan, saying 'they [the audience] took off their hoods' (Smith and Hattery 2013). Serena Williams announced in spring 2015 that she would, for the first time in nearly 15 years, return to play at Indian Wells.

Such racially aggressive behavior has not been limited to fans. Venus and Serena have been targeted by other players as well. And the antagonisms have been personal, targeting them *explicitly as African American women*. Certainly some of the motivation for this behavior may be professional jealousy, though that does not offer an adequate explanation. For example, during an exhibition match in Brazil in 2012, Danish tennis player Caroline Wozniacki appeared on court having stuffed towels into her sports bra and her skirt in an attempt to impersonate Serena Williams, who has a body that is not typical among White women tennis players. Yet the Williams sisters have achieved success not only because of the biological characteristics they possess, perhaps most prominent in their strength, but also by pursuing an innovative training regime,

both mental and physical, that has equipped them with a much better set of game-day skills than their rivals. In short, the Williams sisters win because they are more committed, successful agents than their opponents.

A recurring question in regard to race and sport relates to social class. Is the aggression more about class location than racial identity? In the case of elite minority athletes, the question is whether wealth insulates them from experiencing individual and group racial aggression. In the next section, we explore these issues a bit more closely.

Race versus class

Sometimes when writing about 'racism in SportsWorld' (Smith 2014) we encounter the beliefs that elite-level African American athletes, because of their fame, are protected from the individual and group racial aggressions expressed by fans. We will argue here that while fame can sometimes provide protection, even the most famous and financially successful are not totally immune.

The legal scholar Phoebe Weaver Williams provides evidence of the hostile work environment that the late Reggie White of the Green Bay Packers encountered at the same time that a spate of African American churches were being attacked by arsonists (Williams 1996: 292). White was a preacher campaigning to stop this criminal activity; indeed, his own church in Knoxville, Tennessee, was burned to the ground. Williams points out that during this period the Green Bay Packers specifically chose not to tell White that they had received threats targeting him because of his campaign. Despite his tremendous popularity, White was not immune to racialized aggressive behaviour. Williams (1996) summarizes the arising issues nicely:

When seeking social reforms, African-Americans are reminded that our society rewards merit and excellence. Yet, the experiences of Black athletes, whose merits are meticulously, statistically, and publicly documented, undermine arguments that merit alone rather than race matters in our society. If Black athletes still experience racism, what of other African-Americans whose meritorious performances are not so quantifiable, not so public, and not so clearly extraordinary? If the wealth, the performances, and the economic value African-American athletes bring to our economy do not shield them from racism, then what will shield the rest of us?

(1996: 292)

Another illustration can be seen in the treatment of Tiger Woods, undoubtedly the most successful male golfer of the past 30 years, who has been on the receiving end of racial epithets. Twice, other golfers (Fuzzy Zoeller and Sergio Garcia) have made racialized comments about Woods ordering fried chicken – a heavily stereotypical reference to African American food in the southern states. Both players later apologized for their comments. It is interesting to note how, like much of the abuse directed at Ewing and the Williams sisters, the defence of these comments is that they were simply a form of 'humour'.

Conclusion and recommendations

We have argued here that racism in sport unfolds in several ways. In this chapter we highlighted two ways or 'themes' in which racism is expressed: (1) exclusion and (2) individual and group aggression. When we attempt to move forward and identify recommendations for reducing racism in sports, we must have a clear understanding of the differences in these various expressions as each will require different actions.

Exclusion has, for the most part, moved beyond entire classes of people – such as all Jews or all African Americans – but it still exists as a result of both ideology and patterns of social segregation, which are difficult to eradicate. Several prominent African American athletes who play elite ‘country club’ sports, in which African Americans are grossly underrepresented (Smith 2014), have established development programs for African American youth. These initiatives include the Tiger Woods Learning Center, which focuses on a range of issues including education and golf, and the Legacy Youth Tennis and Education program, which has a similar focus, and in which the late Arthur Ashe was heavily involved. Additionally, one promising approach involves providing funding for under-resourced schools to establish sport programs and teams beyond American football and basketball; the aim here is for boys and girls of all racial and ethnic identities to have the opportunity to play an entire range of sports, including ice and field hockey, football (soccer), volleyball and wrestling.

Another area of significant exclusion is the opportunity to coach in college and professional football and basketball. Despite significant over-representation of African American players at both the college and professional levels, there has been a long-standing under-representation of African American coaches (Smith 2014). In the US there has been a lot of talk, less action, on the implementation of the Rooney Rule in professional sports such as football. The Rooney Rule was introduced in 2003 by Pittsburgh Steelers owner and former US ambassador to Ireland Dan Rooney.

The Rooney Rule stipulates that every time a head coaching position becomes vacant in the American National Football League (NFL), at least one minority candidate must be interviewed. Rooney’s rationale was that this process would reveal appointable candidates who might otherwise be overlooked. Empirical research on this attempt to level the playing field has been limited, but in the end many scholars and activists note that it has not been successful in changing the racial landscape of NFL head coaches. One unintended consequence has been the emergence of sham interviews that are held for non-White applicants for posts in which the successful candidate is already identified.

One such example occurred with the Detroit Lions NFL team, when President Matt Millen (2002–2003) let it be known that his next head coach would be his friend Steve Mariucci, even before any of the interviews had been held. As a result, Millen could not keep to the Rooney Rule as no African American ‘candidates’, of the five contacted for the post, would travel to Detroit for a sham interview. Another example is Art Shell, who did coach for the Oakland Raiders, but after he was fired he became the token Rooney Rule candidate, never winning another coaching opportunity, unlike his similarly situated White colleagues with similar credentials who routinely gained second, third and even fourth chances. There are no minimum quotas for minority recruitment nor are there any penalties for teams that fail to achieve some measure of social diversity in their coaching or managerial staff. Arguably, teams should incur penalties for sham interviews.

If the Rooney Rule were extended into college sport, and had some ‘teeth’, such as penalties for not achieving an agreed level of diversity or for conducting sham interviews, then we can confidently anticipate that more African American men would have these opportunities. And, when groups that are initially excluded from an activity are offered access, they typically reach an equivalent level of performance and success, as we have certainly witnessed on the fields of play (Smith 2014).

Individual and group aggression is perhaps the most difficult form of racism to identify and to prevent. The lessons from the Civil Rights movement in the United States are a case in point. De facto segregation existed long past the time when laws had been passed against this practice. Changing attitudes is a difficult process and often takes generations to accomplish in any

widespread manner. That said, we are optimistic and have one proposal that might be effective. Anti-racism measures and activities – such as the Rooney Rule, or the ‘Kick It Out’ campaigns in European football – are legitimate efforts to end structural racism in sports, but they are – in and of themselves – not enough to get the job done. We suggest that, certainly in the United States context, the national legal system should criminalize aggressive behaviour inside sport and beyond that has racist aspects. For example, fans caught engaging in aggressive behaviour – verbal or physical – could be detained by the facility security and fined. After a second offence, for example, they could be banned for life from attending future events. Fans could be arrested by the local law enforcement and charged with assault. Ultimately in the US, they could be charged with a hate crime. We wonder just how quickly these kinds of responses might result in reductions in individual and group aggression. We certainly would propose some sort of consequence for bad behaviour to see if it would in fact reduce aggressive acts.

Finally, we must note that we have one example that leaves us optimistic. One form of structured racism in team sports that has died a natural death is ‘stacking’. Stacking was the most pernicious form of racism in team sports. As indicated earlier in this chapter, stacking involved coaches placing players into positions according to racial stereotypes, so non-White players were typically excluded from ‘intelligent centre’ roles, such as pitcher or catcher in baseball and quarterback in American football. Stacking had a long life. But today, we find many African American and non-White players in positions from which they were previously systematically excluded.

Notes

- 1 SportsWorld is a term coined by Earl Smith (2014). The term SportsWorld refers to the social, cultural, political and economic institutions that make up the sporting enterprise globally.
- 2 See, especially, <http://science.howstuffworks.com/dictionary/famous-scientists/physicists/william-shockley-info.htm> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sAszZr3SKEs>

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