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The Welcome Theory: An Explanation for the Decreasing Number of African Americans in Baseball

Abstract

The percentage of African Americans on the rosters of major league baseball teams is at a 30-year low, while the percentage of Caucasian players in the major leagues has remained relatively stable. Research indicates that the number of African Americans will continue to drop. The Welcome Theory uses several theoretical perspectives to explore why African Americans have turned away from baseball and embraced other sports, such as basketball. The theory has implications for designing sports programs that socialize youth into sports.

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More than a half century has elapsed since the first African American joined the ranks of a major league baseball team. At that time baseball occupied an important niche in the culture of African Americans (Peterson, 1970). But over the decades baseball has lost its cultural value among African Americans. The number of African Americans who play and watch the game is on a decades-long decline, and that decline is gaining momentum. African-Americans comprised 10 percent of the players on the 40-man rosters of Major League Baseball teams in 2002, compared with 18 percent in 1991. Caucasians comprised approximately 60 percent of players on the 2002 rosters and Hispanics 28 percent, an all-time high (Lapchick, 2003, p. 14). The percentage of African Americans at the major league level could drop further based on the number of Blacks playing in the college and youth ranks. The percentage of Division I college baseball players who are African American spiked at almost 7 p in 2002, after holding steady at 3 to 4 percent during the previous decade (Lapchick, 2003, p. 15). The supply line of African-American players coming from youth leagues narrows further. A survey of 270 youth "select" teams from 25 states and comprising almost 3,000 players (ages 11 to 14) showed that approximately 3 percent of those players were African American (Ogden, 2004). Select teams supposedly contain the best players of their age group in the community and often serve as feeder programs for high schools and colleges.

The proposed paper will explain some of the reasons for the decline of baseball in African-American culture by using the Welcome Theory, a prism incorporating a spectrum of theories to refract the various causes underlying involvement in sport. The Welcome Theory proposes that individuals who engage in sports are socially and culturally conditioned to do so. Because of such conditioning, individuals feel more comfortable or feel as if they have a sense of belonging in some sports as compared with others. This sense or level of comfort may not be related to racial or gender discrimination. It has more to do with the influence of family and friends, cultural forces, access to facilities, and social messages delivered through mass media and other communication forms. Each of these factors will be examined through the lens of the Welcome Theory, which uses concepts from structuration, social construction, social differentiation, leisure and race theories to explain why African American culture has turned away from baseball to embrace other sports, specifically basketball.

Studies have shown that African American youths, more so than white youths, are encouraged to participate in basketball by friends, family and authority figures (Harris, 1994; Philipp, 1999). Such encouragement is carried out within a frame of meaning and importance imposed by the subculture where "members invent and share beliefs, attitudes and patterns of action that meet their needs and assist in coping with their special problems (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1989, p. 198). Appiah (2000) calls this process 'collective identity,' through which characteristics of a culture or subculture become embedded in personal identity.

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Mass media reinforce such culturally accepted notions and imprints athletes of certain sports with certain attributes. Mass media have helped to popularize the stereotype that African Americans are predominant in certain sports (primarily basketball), but not in others (such as baseball). The possible effect of such messages on the formation of sports identities early in youth becomes poignant when considering research that shows that mass media cast athletes and celebrities as the major, if not the only, success stories among African-American males (Boyd. 1997). Mass media then socially construct images of which people play which sports and, as a result, media coverage Of sports contains what Philipp (1999) calls "embedded racial 'information" (p. 397) that suggests certain races belong in certain sports venues.

Feelings of belonging in a sports venue are, in and of themselves, powerful influences on self-identity in sport. Those who feel they do belong have acquired such an outlook because of exposure to and/or experience with those locales (TarLgen, 2004). But for such a personal history to develop, individuals need access to such locales. Giddens' discussion (1979) of structuration theory can be instructive in how such access helps to form identity and subsequently identification. An individual's resources and positioning within a particular set of social structures dictates how that person carries out social routines and activities.

Those routines and activities, repeated often enough and endorsed by the subculture and significant others, provide what Giddens (1984) calls "ontological security," or a feeling of well-being or comfort within a social structure, So while interpersonal contacts and communication give initial direction to identity formation, ongoing routines (the nature of which are dictated by positioning within a social structure) serve to reinforce and somewhat stabilize behaviors, As applied to sports, this means that early and frequent exposure to an athletic activity ca be instrumental in developing an identification with that activity. But the individual's position within a social structure, which would include access to facilities and expertise and involvement by the subculture, will dictate whether that identification is sustained.

The Welcome Theory can be valuable in offering insights into the development of programs to interest youth in sport. While this paper focuses on the paucity of African Americans in baseball and their dominance in basketball, concepts from the Welcome Theory can be applied to any sport and its attempts to interest youth. As applied to baseball, the Welcome Theory can illuminate how Major League Baseball's Reviving Baseball in the Inner Cities (RBI) and other programs to expose African American youths and other minorities to baseball have not been successful in Omaha and other cities. Such programs have to target youths as early in their lives as possible and must offer quality experiences on a frequent basis.

Extensive research is needed to identify other processes important to the formation of identity with a sport and the social and cultural implications of those processes.

References available upon request

Presenter

David C. Ogden, Ph.D. is an assistant professor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He has taught at UNO since 2001, and was associate professor at Wayne State College in Nebraska prior to his current appointment. His research focuses on cultural trends in baseball, specifically the history of the relationship between African-Americans and baseball. He has presented his research at the National Baseball Hall of Fame Symposium on Baseball and American Culture, the Nine Spring Training Conference on Baseball and Culture, and Louisiana State University's Conference on Baseball in culture and Literature. He has published in *Nine: A Journal of Baseball History & Culture*, the *Journal of Leisure Research* and the *Journal of Black Studies* (in press).