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Once You See It, You Can't Unsee It?: Racial Justice Activism and Articulations of Whiteness Among White Collegiate Athlete Activists

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16
17   *Abstract:*

18   The goal of this study was to examine how athletes holding privileged racial identities

19   understand their whiteness as they engage in racial justice activism. Drawing from twelve semi-

20   structured interviews with white collegiate athletes who have engaged in activism for racial

21   justice, we identified four higher-order themes which we situate within a broader discussion of

22   how each theme either reinforces or disrupts racial power: articulations of (1) racial

23   consciousness, (2) white privilege, (3) white empathy, and (4) white accountability. While the

24   *white accountability* theme has the potential to disrupt racial power due to its relying on rigorous

25   self-critique, the remaining themes pointed to limited understandings of the systemic nature of

26   racism, which can thus inadvertently (re)produce white supremacy even when engaging in

27   activism for racial justice. Limitations, implications, and future directions for research are

28   discussed to empower more white athletes to reflect critically on whiteness and facilitate

29   systemic change.

30   ***Keywords:*** *critical whiteness studies, social justice, diversity, equity, race, intercollegiate sport,*

31   *interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA)*

32   In the summer of 2020, the United States (U.S.) witnessed a rejuvenation of the Black

33   Lives Matter movement following the continued murders of unarmed Black Americans by law

34   enforcement within months of each other. As a result, conversations about police brutality,

35   whiteness, and institutional anti-Black racism coursed through academic and non-academic

36   spaces in the U.S. and across the ("Western") world. Accordingly, the U.S. was forced to

37   confront its long, convoluted history with racial injustice and the legacies of systemic racism.

38   Because sport cannot be separated from the society in which it operates (Kaufman & Wolff,

39   2010), the rejuvenation of the Black Lives Matter movement also manifested in the institution of

40   sport. Indeed, athletes across leagues, sports, and sport organizations alike utilized their

41   platforms to call attention to the systemic injustices faced by Black Americans and other racially

42   minoritized populations, drawing from a rich legacy of athletes who have historically used their

43   involvement in sport to demonstrate solidarity for Black Americans and promote positive social

44   change (Zirin, 2021).

45   Athletes from minoritized groups are most likely to engage in activism (Mac Intosh et al.,

46   2020). Therefore, it is not surprising that most research on activism in sport has focused on the

47   experiences of Black athletes (Fuller & Agyemang, 2018), women (Cooky, 2017), LGBTQ+

48   individuals (Anderson et al., 2016), athletes with disabilities or impairments (Bundon & Hurd

49   Clarke, 2015), and individuals holding multiple of the aforementioned identities (Calow, 2021).

50   A significant gap in the scholarship, however, points to the experiences and perceptions of

51   collegiate athletes engaged in activism for racial justice who benefit from the racial hegemony:

52   white athletes. White people often inadvertently (re)produce structural racism on an everyday

53   basis and, as Leonardo (2004) has argued convincingly, "whites recreate their own racial

54   supremacy, despite good intentions" (p. 144). Therefore, the purpose of this exploratory study

55   was to examine how collegiate athlete activists who identify as white understand their whiteness

56   and negotiate their racial privilege while engaging in activism for racial justice. Such information

57   can be used to identify how white people can more effectively work towards progressive and

58   sustainable systemic social change for racial justice without recreating the issue they seek to

59   eradicate.

Critical Whiteness Studies

61   Informed by their work in legal studies during the 1970s and 1980s, Black scholars have

62   developed Critical Race Theory to call attention to how race has operated as a social construct

63   that serves the interest of white people while systematically disadvantaging other racial groups

64   (Bell, 1980; Crenshaw, 1988; Crenshaw et al., 1995). Critical Race Theory scholars challenge

65   the notion that racism solely manifests in individual acts of hatred (a common misperception

66   among the general public) and instead posit racism is structural and integrated into the cultural,

67   political, and social institutions to systemically benefit white people (Gilborn & Ladson-Billings,

68   2019). Informed by the groundbreaking work of critical race theorists and the pioneers paving

69   the way for the critical analysis of systemic racism over.a century ago (see e.g., Du Bois, 1920),

70   *critical whiteness studies* emerged as a critique to studies within the field that reduced inquiry

71   into whiteness to developmental models of white identity and racial consciousness. In turn,

72   critics argued, the institutional and systemic nature of white domination was dismissed

73   (Thompson, 2003; Leonardo, 2004). With the goal of calling into question the systems that

74   reinforce white supremacy as ideology (Applebaum, 2016), critical whiteness scholars argue that

75   whiteness cannot be separated from structures of white supremacy and cannot "[forsake]

76   structural analysis for a focus on the individual" (Leonardo, 2004, p. 141).

77   Leonardo (2013), in particular, critiques how critical whiteness studies must move away

78   from looking at identity and privilege (i.e., micro level) as the center of analysis to

79   manifestations of whiteness as ideological tools reinforcing white hegemony (i.e., the macro

80   level). He writes:

81   … the theme of privilege obscures the subject of domination, or the agent of actions,

82   because the situation is described as happening almost without the knowledge of whites.

83   … The study of white privilege begins to take on an image of domination without agents.

84   It obfuscates the historical process of domination in exchange for a state of dominance *in*

85   *media res* … removing the actions that make it clear who is doing what to whom. Instead

86   of emphasizing the process of appropriation, the discourse of privilege centers the

87   discussion on the advantages that whites receive. It mistakes the symptoms for causes.

88   (Leonardo, 2004, p. 138, emphasis in original).

89   As such, critical whiteness studies move beyond raising awareness of white privilege toward

90   dismantling the structural hierarchy reinforcing the hegemony of whiteness (Foste & Irwin,

91   2020).

92   A key concept in critical whiteness studies is the idea that white people are complicit in

93   keeping white supremacy intact (Applebaum, 2010; Foste & Irwin, 2020). Therefore, critical

94   whiteness scholars must pay close attention to the ways in which white people contribute to the

95   perpetuation of white dominance, despite good intentions or awareness of their white privilege

96   (Applebaum, 2010). For example, white people are socialized into misunderstanding how racism

97   operates on a structural level which works to reinforce racial power (Fields, 2001; Leonardo &

98   Manning, 2017). In addition, Foste and Irwin (2020) argue that the act of being aware of one's

99   whiteness in itself does not lead to structural change, but rather preserves whiteness. They have

100 posited that increased racial consciousness and understanding of racial privilege can deflect from

101 the rigorous self-critique needed to understand one's position within structures of white

102 supremacy (Foste & Irwin, 2020). Contextualization of white people's racial awareness through

103 the acknowledgment of structural components of whiteness is of utmost importance, so that "we

104 do not take white participants' narratives as the final source of authority; rather, speech acts

105 should be examined for their role in creating identity categories grounded in inequitable power

106 structures" (Foste & Irwin, 2020, p. 452).

White Activists' Engagement in Racial Justice Activism

108 It is not surprising then that for white activists' efforts to be effective, they need to have a

109 thorough understanding of their own role in upholding white supremacy and racial inequities, an

110 endeavor that sometimes can be challenging even for those white people committed to racial

111 justice (Eichstedt, 2001). Researchers looking at constructions of whiteness among those

112 attempting to disrupt the current system, such as white antiracist activists, found that well-

113 intentioned white people often inadvertently reinforce white supremacist ideologies. For

114 example, Hughey (2010; 2012) studied constructions of whiteness among white members of two

115 activist organizations at opposite ends of the political spectrum: a white nationalist organization

116 as well as a white antiracist organization. Hughey (2010) found striking similarities between the

117 two when it came to its members' constructions of whiteness, so much so that he concluded that

118 "white racial identities cannot be distilled into static political formations that are distinct and

119 separable; rather they share a common allegiance to dominant racial (and often racist) ideologies

120 that transcend differing belief systems" (p. 1306). Specifically, participants across both

121 organizations bought into essentialist views of whiteness (i.e., white people as being inherently

122 different from and superior to their racially minoritized peers) and engaged in forms of intra-

123 racial distinction through which they separated themselves from white peers deemed inadequate

124 in performing what they viewed as appropriate white identity (Hughey, 2010; 2012).

125   These findings support established research documenting many white activists' inability

126 to apply the critical consciousness needed to achieve antiracist outcomes to their own activist

127 practice (Case, 2012; Warren, 2010). For example, while expressions of systemic racism are

128 often fairly obvious for racially minoritized activists, such manifestations are harder to recognize

129 for white activist peers (Case, 2012). In their study of white activists' participation in efforts to

130 remove racist imagery and mascots from Major League Baseball's Cleveland franchise, Jacobs

131 and Taylor (2011) documented those white activists were at times hesitant to perform necessary

132 organizational tasks to counteract white guilt, which in turn affected the efficiency of the

133 antiracist endeavors. The white activists gave leadership roles to their racially minoritized peers

134 not because they bought into their leadership, but rather because they saw it as a strategy not to

135 engage in as much depth with the organization's work (Jacobs & Taylor, 2011). Set in a different

136 cultural context, Ebert and Pillay (2022) also identified guilt as a barrier to antiracist change;

137 they examined white people's racial justice activism in South Africa and found that activists

138 were not engaging on issues of race at all due to feelings of guilt over their racial privilege.

139   Because such behaviors can be harmful not only to activist efforts but also to the people

140 who would benefit from the activism, scholars have started to look at the impact white racial

141 justice activists can have on their racially minoritized peers engaging in activism. For example,

142 Gorski (2019a, 2019b) found a key contributor to the activist burnout of activists of color was

143 the behaviors of their white activist peers, many of whom "carried their privilege and entitlement

144 into racial justice movements" (Gorski & Erakat, 2019, p. 786). In doing so, they at times

145 perpetuated racist views, were lacking the action-oriented mindset to step up when needed, took

146 credit for their racially minoritized peers' work, and demonstrated defensiveness and white

147 fragility (Gorski & Erakat, 2019). Such tendencies can effectively undermine the efforts of

148 racially minoritized activists and the movements of which they are a part (Gorski, 2019a;

149 Jonsson, 2016; Mallett et al., 2008; Warren, 2010). Because these findings show that white

150 activism can be counterproductive to racial justice movements, yet athlete activism in the arena

151 of sport is becoming more common (Mac Intosh et al., 2020), it is important to better understand

152 the experiences – and potentially harmful behaviors – of white athlete activists committed to

153 racial justice who choose to use their involvement in sport for activist efforts.

154   **Race, Critical Whiteness Studies, and Activism in College Sport**

155   The racial hegemony caused by a system that protects and reinforces whiteness is also

156 reflected in the institution of sport (Hawkins et al., 2017). Although sociologists focused on the

157 study of race in sport initially solely examined the impact of the existence of racism in sport,

158 they more recently have extended their scope to "think of sport as a contested terrain: a space

159 where racial ideologies are circulated, imposed, resisted, changed, and altered" (Carrington,

160 2013, p. 389). Inquiries into the construction of race and the impact of systemic racism have

161 ranged from examining the persistence of whiteness in sport leadership (Bradbury, 2013),

162 socialization into racialized sport (Brooks & McKail, 2008), the intersections of racial and

163 athletic identities (Harrison et al., 2011), barriers facing racially minoritized individuals on

164 predominantly white college campuses (Bimper, 2017; Singer, 2005), experiences of racially

165 minoritized athletes at historically Black colleges and universities (Cooper, 2013), racist

166 stereotypes facing racially minoritized individuals (Sailes, 1993), and development of a sense of

167 belonging among racially minoritized individuals or lack thereof (Carter-Francique, 2018).

168   Researchers have also looked at whiteness in the context of college sport to examine the

169   various ways in which it serves as a site for the maintenance of white power (King, 2005). For

170   example, Vadeboncoeur and Bopp (2019) reviewed literature on white racial identity among

171   collegiate athletes and found that white athletes have high racial consciousness yet often fail to

172   understand how their whiteness affords them structural power. In a separate study,

173   Vadeboncoeur and Bopp (2020) provided further evidence that while white athletes were often

174   able to articulate how whiteness shaped a distinct racial identity and identify examples of overt

175   racism, they struggled to point to the structural nature of racism and the role whiteness played

176   within it. Drawing from critical whiteness studies specifically, Hextrum (2020) pointed to three

177   specific mechanisms that support the maintenance and prevent the disruption of white

178   dominance: racial segregation (i.e., "the creation of racially segregated sporting experiences," p.

179   388), racial innocence (i.e., institutions creating white spaces that allow white athletes not to

180   think about their role in perpetuating racism), and racial protection (i.e., reinforcing white sports

181   as "*the* standard of athletic excellence," p. 390, emphasis in original). These processes facilitate

182   and reinforce underdeveloped understandings of systemic racism among white athletes, thereby

183   "allow[ing] white athletes to dodge their role in racism and avoid racial justice responsibilities'

184   (Hextrum, 2020, p. 385).

185   It is not surprising, then, that research on activism has centered on racially minoritized

186   groups (e.g., Agyemang et al., 2010) – rightfully so, given the central role of Black athletes in

187   many activist movements (Edwards, 2017; Cooper et al., 2019). For decades, athletes –

188   particularly athletes with minoritized identities – have used their status within and platforms

189   provided by sport to speak out against racial injustice in the United States given their first-hand

190   experiences with systemic oppression and discrimination (Agyemang et al., 2020) and fighting

191   for the communities of which they are a part (e.g., Coombs & Cassilo, 2017). Edwards (2017)

192   has argued that athlete activist movements happen in waves, as they often correspond to social

193   movements happening in society at large. However, because sport is often perceived as an

194   apolitical space, backlash against athletes who engage in activism, particularly Black athletes,

195   can be intense (Frederick et al., 2017; Kaufman, 2008; Sanderson et al., 2016). As a result,

196   research on collegiate athlete activism often focuses on Black athletes' activism against racism

197   and their experiences with racism and backlash (Agyemang et al., 2010; Kaufman, 2008). For

198   instance, in 2015, Black football players at the University of Missouri peacefully protested

199   racially charged university-wide discrimination by refusing to play one of their games. Although

200   this protest led to tangible structural change (with the university president resigning), it also

201   shone a light on the integral and often invisible role and operationalization of whiteness in

202   college sport (Frederick et al., 2017; Gill et al., 2020).

203   The Mizzou protest attests to the power of collegiate athlete activists, which may be why

204   scholars have started to examine topics such as resource mobilization (Ferguson & Davis, 2019),

205   motivations for activism (Kluch, 2021), definitions of activism (Kluch, 2020), overall

206   experiences of activists (Fuller & Agyemang, 2018), and perceptions of activist efforts

207   (Frederick et al., 2017) at the collegiate level. These studies, though, almost exclusively focus on

208   collegiate athlete activists who identify as members of minoritized groups – such as Black

209   athletes. Even though white collegiate athletes have expressed positive views in support of

210   engaging in activism for social justice (Mac Intosh et al., 2020) and can utilize their racial power

211   to create systemic change (Jolly et al., 2021), no research to date has examined how whiteness

212   shapes white athlete activists' engagement in activism. Therefore, the following questions guided

213   this study:

214   RQ1: How do white collegiate athlete activists' perceptions of race and racism affect

215   their decision to engage in racial justice activism?

216   RQ2: How does whiteness affect white athletes' engagement in racial justice activism?

217   **Methodology**

218   This study draws from interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), rooted

219   philosophically in Heideggerian hermeneutics (Benner, 1994; Diekelmann, 2001), to find

220   answers to the research questions above. A form of qualitative research tied to a constructionist

221   epistemological tradition, IPA allows researchers to document participants' perceptions of their

222   lived experiences in the broader cultural context they operate in – and then provide an in-depth

223   interpretation of those experiences (Patton, 2002; Smith, 2004). As Smith (2004) puts it, in IPA

224   the "participant is trying to make sense of their personal and social world; the researcher is trying

225   to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world" (p. 40).

226   IPA provides a particularly valuable tool to examine white activism for racial justice

227   because it does not only allow for the close examination of perceptions and interpretations of

228   participants' experience (i.e., participation in racial justice activism as a person with a privileged

229   racial identity), but also situating them within the larger social context that those experiences

230   emerge from (i.e., a society permeated by systemic racism). As such, "person and world are not

231   separate but instead are co-constituting and mutually disclosing" (Palmer et al., 2010, p. 99).

232   Moreover, IPA has been used by scholars to study whiteness in the context of intercollegiate

233   sport (see e.g., Vadeboncoeur & Bopp, 2020).

234   **Participants**

235   Studies utilizing IPA usually draw from a smaller number of participants in order to

236   understand "each participant's experience sufficiently to enable comparison with the experiences

237   of other persons in the study" (Porter & Cohen, 2012, p. 189). Recommendations for sample

238   sizes for studies utilizing IPA range from as few as two to three participants (Dukes, 1984) to up

239   to twelve participants (Ray, 1994), with a robust body of scholarship recommending between

240   eight and twelve participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Parse, 1990; Ray, 1994; Smith et al.,

241   2009). For the present study, twelve participants were recruited using criterion-based purposeful

242   sampling (Patton, 2002). Participants had to self-identify as white, be active collegiate athletes at

243   an NCAA Division I, II, or III institution, and self-identify as an activist for racial justice.

244   Because there is no one way to do activism, participants' involvement in activism ranged from

245   activism on social media platforms (i.e., posts on Instagram and/or Twitter), individual physical

246   actions at sporting competitions (i.e., kneeling during the national anthem), or engaging one's

247   community in social justice related initiatives (i.e., student-led organizations and panels).[1]

248   Our research team utilized a variety of strategies to recruit participants. As researchers

249   and practitioners in sport, we used our professional networks to recruit participants as a first

250   strategy to identify potential participants. Each author reached out to athletic directors,

251   administrators, professors, and/or coaches to identify potential participants and invite them to be

252   a part of the study. It is important to note here that we reached out to individuals with whom we

253   had built rapport through previous collaboration, as it was important to us that these individuals

254   were able to identify potential participants whose activism may not be viewed favorably by the

255   institutions that employ them. As an additional recruitment strategy, some of us used personal

256   connections to students. For example, the lead author led a webinar focusing on social justice in

257   sport in October 2020 which several collegiate athletes who were engaging in racial justice

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[1] We realize that self-identifying as an activist does not speak to the impact of participants' activism; that is, even though they may identify as activists for racial justice, this study cannot speak to the impact participants' activism had. For example, scholars have pointed to the fact that social media activism, sometimes classified as *slacktivism*, can be performative rather than substantive in nature (see e.g., Linder et al., 2016).

258 activism attended. The lead author was then able to reconnect with those athletes to ask if they

259 would be willing to participate in the study. As a third recruitment strategy, research team

260 members also screened online and social media for news coverage of athlete activism and

261 reached out to collegiate athletes who were active on their respective social media accounts

262 about racial justice. For our final recruitment strategy, we relied on snowball sampling (Merriam

263 & Tisdell, 2016) to allow participants to suggest additional participants fitting the criteria of the

264 study. Potential participants were messaged directly to explain the purpose of the study. Once

265 approval was given for participation, a member of the research team contacted the participants to

266 arrange a suitable day and time for the interview.

267   Out of the twelve white collegiate athlete activists in the sample, five identified as men

268 and seven identified as women. The participants competed in a diverse range of sports, including

269 cross country/track and field ($n = 4$), American football ($n = 2$), gymnastics ($n = 1$), softball ($n =$

270 1), rowing, ($n = 1$), crew ($n = 1$) and swimming ($n = 1$). At the time of the data collection, two

271 participants were first-year students, four were juniors, five were seniors, and one was a graduate

272 student. To maintain confidentiality and protect the participants, pseudonyms were used and any

273 other personal identifiers from the transcripts were omitted.

274 **Procedure**

275   This study utilized semi-structured interviewing to understand white collegiate athletes'

276 perceptions and experiences engaging in racial justice activism. Interviews are a commonly used

277 method in IPA as they allow researchers glimpses into participants' experiences (Porter &

278 Cohen, 2012). After securing IRB approval for the study, the researchers started to schedule

279 interviews with participants who had expressed interest in the study.[2] Interviews were scheduled

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[2] While the data presented in this manuscript is focused on whiteness as it relates to racial justice activism, the data were collected as part of a larger phenomenological study looking at the experiences of white collegiate athlete

280   at a time convenient for the participants and were conducted via video conferencing software

281   (i.e., Zoom). Utilizing a semi-structured interview guide as the research instrument, the

282   interviews covered a variety of topics related to whiteness, white racial identity, and racial justice

283   activism to get a comprehensive understanding of participants' understanding of whiteness and

284   how it informs their activism. Specifically, the interview guide comprised sections on

285   participants identities (e.g. "When and how have you learned what it means to be white in the

286   United States?"), views on racial and social justice (e.g., "How would you define racial

287   justice?"), personal background and experiences with activism (e.g., "What role has your

288   education played in your activism?"), motivations for activism ("When and why did you decide

289   to become an activist for racial justice?"), and challenges faced in activism (e.g., "Can you give

290   me an example where someone has responded negatively to your activism?"). The duration of

291   the interviews ranged from 43 minutes to 93 minutes, averaging at 63 minutes. Following the

292   completion of each interview, the research team member who conducted the interview submitted

293   the video recorded interview to a professional transcription service, and each transcript was

294   reviewed for accuracy.

295   Once the transcripts were checked for accuracy, the research team proceeded to analyze

296   the data in an approach combining inductive and deductive coding. In the first round of data

297   analysis, the data was approached inductively utilizing open coding, axial coding, and eventually

298   selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This approach allowed the research team to group the

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activists for racial justice. In its standards for reporting qualitative research, Levitt et al. (2018) underline that the American Psychological Association acknowledges "qualitative studies often legitimately need to be divided into multiple manuscripts because of journal article page limitations, but each manuscript should have a separate focus" (p. 34). Per these guidelines, we made sure that each manuscript has a distinct focus and presents a unique subset of the data, as evidenced by the different research questions provided in each manuscript. For example, while the present manuscript covers two research questions related to perceptions of race and racism, participants' decision to engage in racial justice activism, and the impact of whiteness on white athletes' engagement in racial justice activism, a second manuscript utilizes separate data from the overall sample to examine participants' perceptions of challenges to and facilitators of racial justice activism.

299 raw data and identify broader categories. In this first round of coding, each member of the

300 research team open-coded one of the interview transcripts by assigning a descriptive code to each

301 segment (e.g., a sentence or series of sentences) of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

302 Throughout the open coding of the data, the research team met every other week to discuss their

303 open codes, discrepancies in coding, and the emergence of categories among the open codes.

304 This process laid the groundwork for the next stage in the coding process: axial coding. During

305 the axial coding stage, the research team followed Strauss and Corbin's (1990) approach where

306 "data [were] put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between

307 categories" (p. 96). Drawing these connections between the categories allowed for the

308 organization of the data into coherent clusters that would inform the selective coding process. In

309 the final stage of coding, the selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), we connected categories

310 from the axial coding stage into higher-order themes that speak to the constructions of whiteness

311 among participants. After the inductive round of coding, the following emerging themes were

312 identified: (1) developing racial consciousness, (2) negotiating manifestations of white privilege,

313 (3) navigating racial justice activism, and (4) strengthening empathy. As is common with IPA

314 research, the inductive approach allowed us to look at the data without a particular framework in

315 mind; as such, the framework and themes mapped out in the review of literature were bracketed

316 during the inductive coding process (Porter & Cohen, 2012).

317   In addition, a second round of coding was conducted after the first round of the peer

318 review process for the manuscript. During the peer review process, reviewers suggested the

319 author team situate their findings more within a critical whiteness studies framework. This

320 suggestion led to the research team reanalyzing the coded data deductively using critical

321 whiteness studies as their guiding framework. This allowed for a more nuanced analysis of how

322   the participants' experiences and perceptions either challenged or reinforced racial power. The

323   revised themes identified in this deductive round of coding are presented in the results section.

324   For example, the initial theme "Developing Racial Consciousness" was recoded to "Articulations

325   of Racial Consciousness" (see results).

326   The concept of saturation is to be handled with caution in phenomenological research

327   because the methodology is rooted in the assumption that "there is no end to the new data that

328   can be obtained or to the new insights that can emerge from extant data" (Porter & Cohen, 2012,

329   p. 188). Instead, the data presented "reflects the understanding of the researcher at the time" (p.

330   188). For this study, the research team agreed we can answer the research questions adequately

331   after the completion of the twelfth interview. This decision was made for the following reasons.

332   First, after twelve interviews, participant transcripts continued to reflect similar ideas and

333   redundant codes and themes manifested. Second, scholars have argued that research studies

334   utilizing phenomenology can be saturated with as little as three participants (Dukes, 1984), so

335   twelve participants constitute a sample that is on the larger end of the spectrum in

336   phenomenological research (Parse, 1990; Ray, 1994; Smith et al., 2009). Third, other studies on

337   similar topics achieved saturation with a similar number of participants. For example,

338   Vadeboncoeur and Bopp's (2020) sample included seven white athletes when they examined

339   their construction of whiteness in college sport via IPA. In addition, the number of participants is

340   close to that of other studies investigating whiteness in higher education (see e.g., four

341   participants in Newton & Cooper, 2021), white racial justice activists (see e.g., Jacobs & Taylor,

342   2011), as well as activism in the context of sport (see e.g., ten participants in Fuller &

343   Agyemang, 2018; ten participants in Kaufman, 2008; ten participants in Schmidt et al., 2020;

344   twelve participants in Lee & Cunningham, 2019), further reinforcing our confidence in the

345   collected data.

346   **Trustworthiness**

347   The research team utilized a series of strategies to strengthen the trustworthiness of the

348   study – a key component for quality control in qualitative research (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

349   To ensure credibility of our findings, we aimed for prolonged engagement (Korstjens & Moser,

350   2018) with the research participants, exemplified by the length of interviews (with most lasting

351   over an hour). In addition, team members reviewed participants' educational institutions, athletic

352   programs, and their campus communities to get a strong sense of the context in which the

353   participants operated, as well as to build rapport with participants during the interviews. Given

354   one of our recruitment strategies was to rely on personal networks, some of the participants had

355   established relationships with their respective interviewer prior to the interview, which further

356   strengthened the rapport between researcher and participant. Second, the fact that researchers

357   were part of a larger research team helped build investigator triangulation (Tracy, 2010). The

358   research team met on a biweekly basis throughout the duration of the study to provide a space for

359   continued discussion of and reflection on the research at all stages – from conceptualization to

360   the writing of the research reports. Such continued collaboration is particularly encouraged for

361   studies utilizing IPA given the approach's interpretative nature (Porter & Cohen, 2012). Third,

362   keeping an audit trail allowed us to increase the dependability of the research, which is why we

363   were as transparent as possible in describing each stage of the project and kept records of each

364   component throughout the course of the study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

365   Fourth and finally, given IPA relies on our interpretations of participants' (perceptions of

366   their) experiences, a continuous process of reflexivity strengthened the trustworthiness of the

367 project as it allowed us to reflect on the biases our positionalities as researchers brought to the

368 study. Our team consisted of six researchers with various academic backgrounds, identities, and

369 entry points to this topic. The first author identifies as a bisexual/queer, white, cisgender man

370 who is able-bodied. He has been trained in cultural studies, sociology, and communication

371 studies and his work mostly draws from interpretive or critical epistemological frameworks to

372 study topics like barriers to social justice in sport. The second author is a former elite athlete who

373 identifies as a straight, white, abled-bodied, cisgender woman. She has been trained in English

374 studies, sport studies, and cultural studies. Her work is grounded in critical epistemological

375 frameworks, specifically feminist cultural studies, to study women in sport and social justice

376 in/through sport. The third author identifies as a straight, white, cisgender man. He has been

377 trained in sport and exercise psychology. The fourth author identifies as a white, cisgender gay

378 man with backgrounds in sport psychology and social work. His work focuses on engaging

379 athletes, as well as LGBTQ+ people outside sport, in advocacy and community spaces. The fifth

380 author identifies as a Black, abled-bodied, straight, cisgender man. He has been trained in

381 sociology, applied psychology, and sport psychology. His work focuses on topics like coach and

382 athlete leadership development and athlete activism. The sixth author is a former collegiate

383 athlete who identifies as a Black, cisgender, gay man. His work focuses on identifying/

384 transforming societal barriers that prohibit access, equity, and inclusion for racial and gendered

385 minorities in and beyond sport.

386   Our positionality statement shows that our research team brought together individuals

387 with racial privilege (i.e., white scholars) and those lacking such privilege (i.e., Black scholars).

388 Following the promising practices for interdisciplinary research groups mapped out by Krane

389 and colleagues (2012), we thrived to create a team culture that was non-hierarchical, engaged in

18

390 a continuous process of questioning our methods and experiences working on the study, and

391 incorporated reflexivity at all stages in the research process. Because our research focused on

392 whiteness and attention to scholars' unique position in relation to the group being studied

393 (Berger, 2015), engaging in continued individual and collective reflexivity was of utmost

394 importance to us. In fact, we utilized both individual (e.g., reflexive diaries, interview field

395 notes) and collective (e.g., research team meetings) tools for reflexivity over the course of the

396 study – from its conceptualization to the write-up of the manuscripts for publication.[3] This

397 process of continued reflexivity, including on how whiteness has shaped the study and its

398 publication(s), allowed our team to become what Krane et al. (2012) call a "productive,

399 interdisciplinary entity" (p. 250).

Results and Discussion

401 We identified four higher-order themes in the data, which we situate within a broader

402 discussion of how each theme either reinforces or disrupts racial power. The first two themes

403 focused on (1) articulations of racial consciousness and (2) articulations of white privilege. As

404 such, both themes reinforced limited understandings of the systemic nature of white racial

405 domination, thereby problematizing white athlete activists' conceptualizations of racism and

406 whiteness. A third theme, (3) articulations of white empathy, provides insights into how white

407 athlete activists utilize empathy in racial justice activism. While such empathy can lead to a more

408 rigorous understanding of systemic minoritization, the participants also centered whiteness in

409 developing empathetic qualities. Finally, participants shared elements of rigorous self-critique

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[3] We recognize that the first four authors of this specific manuscript identify as white, while the final two authors identify as Black, prompting the question as to what degree the order of authors reproduces racial power and reinforces whiteness as the unmarked norm. Rooted in our research team's commitment to equity, we divided our team into smaller sets of lead scholars on each manuscript coming from the present study. This way, we made sure that authorship was equitable across the manuscripts, and author(s) with a later rank in the authorship order are listed higher on order manuscripts coming from the research team.

410   needed to dismantle white supremacy (Leonardo, 2004), which is captured in the final theme of

411   (4) articulations of white accountability. Together, the four themes provide a first exploratory

412   insight into the complex ways in which white collegiate athlete activists perceive race and

413   whiteness while engaging in racial justice activism.[4]

Reinforcing Racial Power: Articulations of Racial Consciousness

415   One of the key critiques of critical whiteness studies has been that traditional studies of

416   whiteness reduced the concept to racial consciousness and identity development, hence taking

417   away from whiteness as structural racial power by focusing on the individual (Leonardo, 2004).

418   This focus on the individual rather than the systemic nature of whiteness was also expressed by

419   the participants in the present study, reinforcing findings from the literature that have

420   documented a lack of critical consciousness among some white activists despite their

421   commitment to racial justice (Case, 2012; Warren, 2010; Jacobs & Taylor, 2011). When asked

422   about how whiteness informs their activism, participants frequently pointed to processes of racial

423   consciousness as a motivation to engage in activism. Some participants, especially the seven

424   competing in sports such as basketball, football, and track and field, specifically pointed to racial

425   diversity in their sports as catalysts for racial consciousness development. For instance, Logan (a

426   senior on the men's football team at a Division I institution in the Northeast) captured this idea

427   best when stating he had been "exposed to people from different backgrounds from the time that

428   I was four years old and could pick up a basketball." The idea that sport exposed them to racial

429   diversity which helped them develop racial consciousness was shared by Brynlee, a junior on the

430   women's basketball team at a Division I school in the West, who explained that "just being

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[4] Throughout the results section, we use the phrasing "articulations of …" to underline that this data represents participants' perspectives and, therefore, center white perceptions of whiteness. They focus on intent rather than impact (see recommendations for future studies in conclusion), which is why we use the wording of "articulations of …" to decenter whiteness as an unquestioned norm.

431 around basketball, I was around a lot of Black people … so I obviously could tell that there was a

432 big difference."

433   In addition to their sports experience, participants also explained that time in college was

434 crucial to their racial consciousness, because "there's lots more racial diversity on campus," as

435 Ava (a Division III athlete on the women's cross country/track and field team at a Midwestern

436 institution) pointed out. Other factors in college that informed participants' racial consciousness

437 include the physical community in which the school was located (e.g., Abby: "When I moved

438 downtown, I became more aware of my whiteness. I became more aware of the comments

439 people would make of why I couldn't go to certain parts of town") or the lack of racial diversity

440 in their sport compared to campus (Patrick: "I'm part of the men's rowing team here and we're

441 … all white"). Zachary (a graduate student men's football player at a Division I school in the

442 South), for instance, disclosed that "I've never really sat down and thought 'I'm a white man.'"

443 Participants also reflected on how white privilege manifested itself in their upbringing. For

444 example, participants pointed to the fact that they grew up in predominantly white, wealthy

445 suburbs and had educational experiences that were largely devoid of experiences associated with

446 racial stress. Other participants, such as Quinn (a senior on a Division I women's crew team at an

447 institution in the Northeast), recounted educational experiences outside of college that informed

448 their racial consciousness. Quinn shared the story of a trip to South Africa with her mother,

449 saying the trip was "when I kind of realized how much injustice there was and how something

450 like identity, something that you can't control like race, can just be this huge factor of where

451 you're going to be in life."

452   Quinn's statement illustrates some of the problems in the participants' turn to activism

453 due to increased racial consciousness; that is, they often work to *reinforce* whiteness rather than

454   disrupt it – a finding that supports non-sport literature examining the impact of white activists in

455   racial justice activism (Hughey, 2010; Hughey, 2012; Jonsson, 2016; Mallett et al., 2008;

456   Warren, 2010). When racism is defined as *natural* rather than *human made* ("something that you

457   can't control like race," according to Quinn), they reinforce white hegemony (Leonardo, 2004;

458   McDonald, 2005). As such, participants' articulations of racial consciousness align with recent

459   research showing that white athletes, while being aware of their whiteness, struggle to identify

460   ways in which that whiteness provides them with structural power (Vadeboncoeur & Bopp,

461   2020; Vadeboncoeur & Bopp, 2019). Their articulations of racial consciousness also provided

462   further evidence for two of mechanisms Hextrum (2020) identified as reinforcing and

463   maintaining white dominance; namely, the facilitation of sport experiences along racial lines

464   (evidenced by participants' emphasis on increased racial diversity at college), and the creation of

465   environments of racial innocence allowing the white athletes not to question the role they play in

466   perpetuating racism. Participants' desire to seek exposure to racial diversity, in particular, can

467   reflect colonizing logics as they are exploiting the presence of racially minoritized peers for

468   personal gain (Chen & Mason, 2019). This became particularly evident when athletes such as

469   Zachary and Finley actively tried to engage in conversation with their peers to "relate to them

470   more." They sought out Black peers to help educate them on the impact of racism – which, as

471   Olivia pointed out, "[has] really opened [my] eyes." This places burden on the back of Black

472   athletes rather than seeking other sources of knowledge on their own (e.g., reading educational

473   resources or participating in racial awareness workshops). Such colonizing behaviors are in line

474   with Hughey's (2010) observations of antiracist white activists, who often "use social

475   relationships with people of colour" as "a 'remedy' to a negative and empty whiteness" (p.

476   1299).

477 **Reinforcing Racial Power: Articulations of White Privilege**

478   In addition to naming increased racial consciousness as a motive for engaging in

479 activism, participants also articulated how their whiteness gave them privilege compared to their

480 peers who did not identify as white. This further problematizes participants' understanding of

481 racism since "the theme of privilege obscures the subject of domination" (Leonardo, 2004, p.

482 138). Olivia, a junior gymnast on the women's gymnastics team at a Division I institution in the

483 South, best captured this sentiment when she stated whiteness meant "just being born with

484 privilege … an unearned privilege that so many people don't really recognize that they have …

485 [it doesn't mean] that they can't still support other races, other minorities and stuff like that."

486 Similar to Olivia, Finley (a first-year athlete on the women's cross-country/track and field at a

487 Division III institution in the Midwest) explained that whiteness meant having privilege in a

488 system where white people "have been set up to have all of the things that I need: a good

489 education, … a safe home, and a safe neighborhood … I need to be aware of those who do have

490 a different situation." Ava added that white privilege meant whiteness is "something that we sort

491 of expect and not necessarily realize that it is a privilege until we see others that don't have it."

492   A second sub-theme that emerged from descriptions of white privilege was that of

493 moments of heightened racial privilege, referring to the socio-cultural climate in which the

494 athlete activists operated that made them hyper-aware of their privilege. Scholars have long

495 argued that increased momentum in social movements have led to athletes' engagement in

496 activism (Edwards, 2017; Kaufman, 2008; Agyemang et al., 2010; Cooper et al., 2019). Notably,

497 these moments of heightened racial consciousness led to reflections on white privilege, which

498 often led a sense of urgency among the participants, as Summer (women's cross country/track

499 and field, Division III, junior, Northeast) captured aptly when saying: "It was never something I

500 thought about, but then once you see it, you can't unsee it … I just want to talk about it. I want

501 other people to see it." Among the moments of heightened racial consciousness referenced by

502 participants was the 2020 presidential election, the COVID-19 pandemic and its intersection with

503 the Black Lives Matter movement, along with the unwarranted violent behavior by police

504 gaining national news coverage. For example, Zachary said the murder of Ahmaud Arbery made

505 him realize what his Black teammates were going through. He then "started thinking more and

506 more…[and] realized this has to change and I need to step up and be an ally." Similarly, for

507 Patrick (Division I, men's crew, senior, Northeast) "the spark was, as for everyone else in this

508 country, the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor." Logan also shared an example where

509 a teammate reached out to the white people on the team telling them that "your silence has been

510 deafening," which led him to reflect on their racial privilege.

511   Similar to articulations of racial consciousness, these activists' speaking to white

512 privilege "centers the discussion on the advantages that white receives [and] it mistakes the

513 symptoms for causes" (Leonardo, 2004, p. 138). Scholars have argued that white people are

514 often socialized into misunderstanding the systemic nature of racism by assigning the concept to

515 the personal/individual level rather than looking at how racism and white supremacy are woven

516 into the fabric of every aspect of society (Fields, 2001; Leonardo & Manning, 2017). Despite

517 good intentions, such misunderstandings can then reinforce racial power (Hughey, 2010; Hughey

518 2012; Case, 2012): in other words, just being aware of one's white privilege does not lead to

519 structural change (Foste & Irwin, 2020). By focusing on articulations of white privilege, the

520 white athlete activists in this study may inadvertently (re)produce structural white supremacy

521 because their focus on *their* advantages – rather than why and where those advantages are

522   coming from – can prevent the rigorous level of self-critique needed to grasp one's role in white

523   supremacy (Foste & Irwin, 2020).

524   **Reinforcing or Challenging Racial Order? Articulations of White Empathy**

525   A third theme identified in the data is what we call *white empathy*. In this case,

526   participants articulated various ways in which they empathized with minoritized peers, racially

527   or otherwise. Indeed, participants discussed the ways in which their engagement in activism for

528   racial justice as white collegiate athletes relied on their ability to empathize with individuals who

529   hold different identities than them – a sentiment that was particularly strong if a loved one or

530   family member had experienced discrimination. For example, Ethan talked about his siblings,

531   who are members of the LGBTQ+ community and whom had faced discrimination first-hand. He

532   explained: "I've never been exposed to [that] before [so] that was an incredibly eye-opening

533   thing and it was something that taught me to just be inclusive and supportive of everyone around

534   me no matter what their scenario is." Quinn explained how growing up with two moms who "are

535   big advocates for gender and sexual orientation advocacy" influenced her political sentiments,

536   saying LBGTQ+ advocacy has "been instilled in [her] personally." Logan, whose father is white

537   and mother is Black, recalled a time his father experienced derogatory comments "where he got a

538   voice message that was essentially a death threat calling him an n-word lover … he's always

539   been somebody that has promoted to me the importance of diversity and empathy, so I would say

540   that had a huge role in [my activism]."

541   In addition to speaking on how significant others in their life have suffered from

542   discrimination, participants also shared accounts of their ability to empathize with their racially

543   minoritized peers due to their own experiences with discrimination based on identities they held

544   beyond their racial identity – such as those rooted in sexual orientation, gender, national origin,

545   and being an athlete. For example, Olivia pointed out the discrimination she faces as a gay

546   woman when "[people said that I] was going to hell for being gay or that love was made for a

547   man and a woman," which made her become "just miserable [and] not being [her] true self." As

548   she put it, "being a part of a [minoritized] group helps to understand what a different minority

549   group might go through." Echoing Olivia, Abby (Division I, softball, junior, South) noted that

550   understanding more about her identity as a queer person enabled her to "see the world in a new

551   lens." In so doing, she felt she "had to break open that very close-minded, white, conservative

552   culture that [she] grew up in."

553   When it comes to gender, participants recounted experiences related to gender inequities

554   they had experienced. For example, Brynlee revealed that their women's basketball games were

555   not promoted nearly as much as those of the men's team, because, when it came to their

556   institution, "they just don't care … they scheduled a tailgate during our game, before the men's

557   game right outside the gym." Likewise, Ava pointed to her experiences as a woman high jumper

558   in college and the lack of attention she was often given compared to her counterparts on the

559   men's team:

560   There are times in sports when I feel that I'm not getting the treatment or the attention I

561   should be. High jump is my main event, and I am good at it and a lot of times, we also

562   have a really good male who jumps...I feel that my time is being wasted because [the

563   coaches] are more involved in the male jumper whereas they could be teaching me … I

564   deserve the same amount of treatment and time being put into.

565   Much like Ava and Brynlee, other participants recalled moments in their lives where they did not

566   feel like they were part of the dominant group. Given that research has shown that holding at

567   least one minoritized identity makes athletes more likely to engage in activism (Mac Intosh et al.,

568 2020), this finding was not surprising – despite the participants occupying whiteness which

569 granted them privilege when it came to their racial identity.

570 Scholars are torn on the role of emotions and empathy, or what some call affective or

571 feeling-based knowledge (e.g., Collins, 1993; Jacobs & Taylor, 2011; O'Brien, 2001; Perry &

572 Shotwell, 2009), in racial justice activism by white people. Some scholars argue that affective

573 knowledge generally, and empathy specifically, are critical elements in antiracist efforts because

574 it makes white people more likely to engage in antiracist efforts in the first place (O'Brien,

575 2001). Such empathy also can potentially enable white activists to take the perspectives of their

576 racially minoritized peers, which can lead to feelings of white guilt that serves as inspiration to

577 engage in collective action benefitting oppressed groups (Mallett et al., 2008).

578 However, other scholars have been cautious when it comes to the role of such emotions

579 in nurturing white people's activist efforts. For example, feelings of white guilt can lead to

580 defensiveness, which in turn can counteract antiracist praxis (Warren, 2010), serve as a barrier to

581 effective communication (Iyer et al., 2003), and lead to them closing themselves off to the

582 racially minoritized communities they intend to support (Jacobs & Taylor, 2011). These

583 behaviors can actively harm racially minoritized populations; for instance, they can contribute to

584 activist burnout of racially minoritized activists (Gorski & Erakat, 2019) and thereby undermine

585 their activist efforts (Gorski, 2019a; Jonsson, 2016; Mallett et al., 2008).

586 It is important to note here that, while holding a minoritized identity seemingly

587 strengthened participants' ability to empathize with racially minoritized peers, such articulations

588 did not come without problems. In fact, the participants' descriptions of empathy inadvertently

589 center whiteness – especially since they rarely spoke to concepts such as intersectionality which

590 looks at the interaction of multiple axes of oppression (Harris & Patton, 2019). While research

591 on activism among racially minoritized athletes often captures participants' centering of

592 intersectionality (e.g., Calow, 2021; Davis Brooks & Knox, 2022), the white college athletes in

593 this study rarely spoke to intersecting axes of oppression, hence articulating minoritization

594 through the lens of whiteness.

595 **Challenging Racial Order: Articulations of White Accountability**

596 A final theme was that of *white accountability*. This theme, we believe, has the most

597 potential to challenge and disrupt white supremacy since it points to a more rigorous level of

598 self-critique, including acknowledging one's own role in upholding white supremacy. White

599 antiracist activism can be effective when white activists acknowledge "white racism and their

600 individual, unavoidable roles in perpetuating racial inequalities" (Jacobs & Taylor, 2011, p. 689).

601 Put more succinctly, Eichstedt (2001) argues that such activists must "embrace the oppressor

602 label at the same time that they challenge oppressor identity and behavior" (p. 460). Similar to

603 non-sport white athlete activists (Eichstedt, 2001; Frankenberg, 1993; O'Brien, 2001), this

604 study's participants' awareness of how whiteness manifested itself throughout their lives led to a

605 desire to utilize their position in the racial order for racial justice action. For example, Olivia

606 explained:

607 One of the things that I read that really stood out to me was if you're not willing to

608 recognize your privilege and stand up in a way then you're a part of the problem. And if

609 you're not able to take advantage of your privilege … to use your voice and create

610 change then you're not going to be part of the solution.

611 For Ethan, a Division III senior on the swim and dive team at a school in the Northeast, starting

612 to create change meant engaging other white people in racial justice work, a sentiment that was

613 shared by other participants whose activism included counteracting feelings of white fragility

614   (DiAngelo, 2011) among white people. Finley explained that white people often feel

615   "demonized" when racial justice is brought up which leads them to "shut down and put up walls"

616   (interestingly, this is behavior can be seen in white people across ideological orientations,

617   including those committed to racial justice; see Hughey, 2010). The collegiate athletes in this

618   study who were aware of their role in upholding the racial order often pushed back against these

619   metaphorical walls to, as Summer pointed out, counteract white fragility, make whiteness visible

620   (Applebaum, 2016), and "make people have uncomfortable conversations that they want to

621   ignore."

622   Since the institutional power of whiteness in college sport (and in larger society) is left

623   largely unquestioned (Frederick et al., 2017; Gill et al., 2020), participants stressed the

624   importance of holding other white people accountable for their actions and attitudes towards

625   race, even if it meant disrupting the status quo. As Finley explained, "you don't have to allow …

626   what you think other people are thinking of you to stop you from doing what you know is right."

627   Participants described different ways in which they engaged other white people, specifically their

628   family members, in conversations about whiteness. For example, Summer explained that she

629   often uses examples of gender inequities in college sport as an entry point into conversations

630   about systemic racism with her family and friends.

631   Holding fellow white people accountable also meant challenging the colorblind mentality

632   and avoiding the white savior trope that white activists sometime inadvertently feed into (Duvall

633   & Guschwan, 2013; Mkwesha & Huber, 2021). For example, Summer stated "if you don't

634   actually look at race, then you're just ignoring the patterns of issues and you can't fix a problem

635   without identifying it first." This shows the significance of everyday conversation as action

636   towards systemic change in which white collegiate athletes "can also use our privilege to

29

637 continue to speak up and continue to be those advocates and show our activism outwardly," as

638 Ava put it. Further, participants detailed a certain willingness to be "comfortable in being

639 uncomfortable" when having conversations and engaging in activism for racial justice. For

640 example, Quinn urged that "you will have to be uncomfortable and you will have to put yourself

641 out there, and you will have to have this fear of making mistakes, because you are going to make

642 mistakes … all you can do is [do] your best." It is this sense of vulnerability that is vital to

643 driving change, as Summer explained: "If you don't make people uncomfortable to see an issue,

644 it's never really going to change."

645 It is important to note here that while participants were aware of the need to be

646 uncomfortable, they also recognized that, compared to their Black peers, there was less risk for

647 them when engaging in activism. As Ethan put it, he hasn't "experienced discrimination, ... [I

648 can] be as loud as I want and nobody's going to ... come after me for it." Participants frequently

649 discussed the consequences of engaging in activism for racial justice. Research shows the

650 subsequent backlash athletes who hold marginalized identities experience, which can include

651 loss of fans and endorsements, sanctions from sports governance organizations, or racist abuse

652 (e.g., Agyemang et al., 2010; Kaufman, 2008). The participants in this study, all of whom hold

653 racially privileged identities, experienced much less violent backlash which reflects the

654 perceived nonthreatening persona their whiteness provides them. For example, Hudson described

655 feeling "a little bit judged" when he engaged in activism for racial justice but he didn't "really

656 care because I believe in what I do." Other participants described fallouts with family, friends, or

657 teammates. As such, our study shows the consequences for white collegiate athletes are far less

658 demoralizing and destructive than that for their racially minoritized peers. More white collegiate

659   athletes, therefore, should engage in activism for racial justice given the power they hold in

660   promoting systemic institutional change without facing major repercussions.

Conclusion, Implications & Future Research

662   The goal of this study was to understand how collegiate athletes holding privileged racial

663   identities – white athletes – understand their whiteness as they navigate activism for racial

664   justice. Because most research on race and activism to date has focused on Black athletes, the

665   present study adds to literature on activist efforts by examining how white collegiate athletes'

666   whiteness affects their engagement in racial justice activism. Drawing from literature on athlete

667   activism and informed by critical whiteness studies, our research revealed white collegiate

668   athletes invested in racial justice have the potential to disrupt white supremacy when centering

669   rigorous self-critique. However, participants often relied on limited understandings of racism. As

670   a result, they, as white people in sport, inadvertently perpetuate white racial domination. We also

671   found that empathy plays a crucial role in white athletes' activism for racial justice; yet, such

672   empathy must *de*center whiteness in order to actively disrupt white supremacy. More

673   promisingly, participants' engagement in activism was a way to hold their white peers

674   accountable and encourage fellow white people to be more comfortable with the discomfort of

675   thinking critically and talking openly about their whiteness. Both of these practices are crucial to

676   disrupt a system rooted in whiteness.

677   Given white athletes' power in engaging other white people to contribute to systemic

678   change, our study has some implications and recommendations for research and praxis. First, our

679   research focused on the perspectives of white athletes engaging in activism for racial justice but

680   did not account for how their Black peers perceived such activism. For example, it is possible

681   that while white athletes perceive their activism to be impactful, such activism may be perceived

682   differently by peers holding minoritized racial identities. In this study, several participants noted

683   that their racial consciousness-raising improved their relationships with Black friends and

684   teammates, yet we cannot confirm a similar experience from their friends' and teammates'

685   perspectives. Future studies, therefore, should examine the impact white athletes' activist efforts

686   have on the communities they are aiming to help (e.g., their Black teammates).

687   In addition, participants spoke of the importance of disrupting the systemic issues that

688   provide white people with advantages in the first place, showing how crucial it is for whiteness

689   to be addressed among those occupying it. Athletics administrators should, therefore, create

690   programming that not only engages white athletes on their racial identities, but also maps

691   specific ways in which white athletes can disrupt the status quo. Existing programming on race

692   and racial justice should specifically integrate content on systemic racism and white supremacy.

693   Second, activism is often led by those experiencing and confronted with discrimination.

694   Systemic change, however, often relies on buy-in from privileged groups. Administrators must

695   provide resources for white athletes to learn how they can become effective allies for racial and

696   social justice (e.g., by connecting them with offices on campus). Third and finally, our

697   participants spoke extensively to the role whiteness played in their activist efforts, yet our study

698   was exploratory in nature, thus further systematic inquiries are needed to understand how

699   athletes can disrupt whiteness. In addition, little research has been done on the challenges white

700   athletes face in activist efforts. Future research must look more closely at the barriers to white

701   athlete activism so that white athletes can more strategically and effectively utilize their position

702   to facilitate systemic change and, without inadvertently reinforcing systemic injustice, be on the

703   frontlines leading for change.

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