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**Race and Ethnicity in the Sociology of Sport in the United States**

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*"The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line, the question as to how far differences of race will hereafter be made the basis of denying to over half the world the right of sharing the opportunities and privileges of modern civilization."*

W.E.B. Dubois

These words, written in 1900 as Dubois prepared for the first Pan African Congress in London, predated a similarly prophetic statement in the forward of his classic book, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). For six decades Dubois used sociological theory and methods to study race and racial relations in the United States, producing numerous books and hundreds of insightful essays. However, it wasn't until 1944 when Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal wrote *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* that the topic of race attracted concerted attention from sociologists and other scholars in the United States.

When the sociology of sport emerged as a sub-discipline in the fields of sociology and physical education during the 1960s, race and racial relations attracted immediate attention from scholars and social activists. Two scholarly publications in the early 1960s focused on the sociological dynamics underlying the desegregation of professional baseball (Broom and Selznick, 1963; Blalock, 1962), but the most provocative discussions of race and sport were published in the late 1960s and early 1970s by sociologist-activist Harry Edwards, an organizer of the boycott by black U.S. athletes of the 1968 Summer Olympic Games in Mexico City. Edwards' book, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete*, published in 1969, clearly described the exclusion and exploitation of blacks in sports and challenged popular assumptions that sports were free of racism and provided African Americans with opportunities for upward social mobility and social acceptance in society at large.

Edwards' work was complimented by the writing of other scholar-activists (Scott, 1969; Hoch, 1972) and developed further in his *Sociology of Sport* (1973), the first textbook in the field. Edwards (1971) also was the most visible sociologist to critique a widely-read article in *Sports Illustrated*, a major weekly sport magazine, in which a sportswriter (Kane, 1971) argued that blacks were physiologically superior to whites and that the success of blacks in certain sports was due their natural abilities as athletes.

## **EARLY RESEARCH ON RACE AND SPORTS**

At the same time that Edwards and other scholar-activists were writing in popular sources and publicly debating issues related to race and sports, scholars in various disciplines initiated research that statistically documented patterns of racial segregation

and discrimination in sports and provided general explanations for why those patterns existed.<sup>1</sup>

Dozens of empirical studies beginning in the 1970s provided evidence showing that the structure of race relations and the prevailing racial ideology in the United States shaped and constrained patterns of desegregation in sports. This research focused on a combination of topics, including entry barriers faced by black athletes, patterns of racial stacking in which black athletes were over- or under-represented in particular positions on sport teams, and the exclusion of blacks and other ethnic minorities from positions of off-the-field leadership, such as coaching and management, in sport organizations.

These patterns, when observed by many whites who viewed the world in racialized terms, generally reinforced the racist ideology that created them. In this sense, the initial desegregation of sports reaffirmed racist notions about the physical superiority and intellectual inferiority of blacks relative to whites. Among whites in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s it was widely believed that blacks excelled in sports and team positions that demanded power and speed at the same time that inferior intellectual abilities prevented them from assuming leadership positions on the field and in coaching and management positions off the field. The success of white athletes, on the other hand, was explained in terms of character, hard work, intelligence, well planned strategies, and superior organizational skills.

### **Entry Barriers.**

Research done between the late 1960s and early 1980s indicated that blacks were recruited only into certain sports. For example, when Jackie Robinson broke the color line in major league baseball by signing a contract with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947, baseball was the most financially profitable team sport in the United States. Branch Rickey, the man who signed Robinson to a contract, convinced his fellow owners, all of whom were white, that Robinson would increase gate receipts and help the Dodgers win more games. Although owners of others teams initially objected to desegregation, they changed their minds as it became clear that Robinson attracted both white and black spectators to games and increased profits for all teams.

As the white owners in baseball and other major revenue producing sports in the United States slowly desegregated, they recruited only black athletes with exceptional physical skills. The existence of a selection bias in professional sport was first noted by Rosenblatt (1967) in his study of major league baseball. Using performance data from 1953 through 1965 he found that black players outperformed white players during every season. His findings were supported by others who studied baseball (Pascal and Rapping, 1972; Eitzen and Yetman, 1977; Lapchick, 1984), football at the college and professional levels (Scully, 1973; Tolbert, 1975), and basketball on both the intercollegiate and professional levels (Yetman and Eitzen, 1972; Lapchick, 1984).

In sports where there were no economic incentives for whites to permit or promote desegregation, it did not occur, or it occurred very slowly in limited situations. In sports where athletes learned skills and played in social settings, such as the club sports of golf and tennis, there was strong resistance to desegregation. This was due to whites who wanted to maintain social distance from blacks and feared social and possible sexual contact between black men and white women.

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<sup>1</sup> See Coakley, 1986 for a complete documentation of this research.

Anecdotal information published in the print media during these years also suggested that there were informal racial quotas that restricted the number of blacks on any given team. White team owners, managers, and coaches, it was hypothesized, feared that attendance might decline if the proportion of black players on a team surpassed what white spectators defined as appropriate. This was consistent with Blalock's (1970) theory of race relations in which he noted that such quotas would be set at the point where blacks can no longer make it profitable for team owners and administrators to treat them in nondiscriminatory terms.

### **Racial "Stacking"**

Through the 1980s the most popular research topic in the sociology of sport was racial stacking. The first and most influential study on this topic was done by John Loy and Joseph McElvogue (1971). Using team photos and public information about players, Loy and McElvogue identified the race of all players on the starting rosters of major league baseball and professional football teams for the 1967 and 1968 seasons, respectively. They analyzed their data in light of Oscar Grusky's (1963) theory of formal organizations. Grusky theorized that individuals who occupied centrally located positions in an organizational structure were more likely than those who occupied non-central positions to (1) engage in frequent interaction with others in the organization, and (2) be involved in interdependent tasks requiring interpersonal cooperation and coordination. Therefore, Loy and McElvogue hypothesized that racial segregation on a sport team would be positively related to the centrality of positions in the organizational structure of the team. The patterns in baseball and football strongly supported their hypothesis: blacks rarely played central positions and they were heavily overrepresented in the non-central positions; at the same time, whites rarely played non-central positions and were heavily overrepresented in central positions. Loy and McElvogue suggested that these patterns could be explained by a combination of two factors: (1) a desire on the part of white players and team management to maintain a form of organizational segregation that preserved social distance between whites and blacks on teams, and (2) beliefs on the part of management that blacks were less able than whites to successfully play positions that required interpersonal coordination and decision-making.

This form of position segregation within teams was relatively easy to study because it involved counting and classifying athletes by race and position. Consequently, there were numerous studies of stacking in a wide range of men's and a few women's team sports (see Coakley, 1998 and Smith and Leonard, 1997 for a full list of references to this research). Although the pattern of racial stacking in certain U.S. sports was undeniable (and continues to exist in some cases) there were debates over how it should be explained. Scholars from different disciplines offered a range of biological, psychological, economic, and sociological explanations of stacking (Coakley, 1998). Although research in sociology and psychology suggested that the patterns were due to the use of racial stereotypes by coaches and other administrators who make player personnel decisions, the data never led to any widely accepted theory.

### **Exclusion from Positions of Leadership**

A third topic studied in early sociological research on race and sport focused on the exclusion of blacks from positions of leadership, such as coaching and management, in

sport organizations. During the 1970s it became clear that desegregation on the playing field did not mean that blacks would have access to positions in the power structures of sport organizations. The popular press occasionally published stories about this issue and presented data documenting the absence of black coaches, general managers, and top administrators.

It was not until the mid-1980s that systematic data on this phenomenon was published in a source that was widely accessible to scholars in the sociology of sport. In 1984, scholar-activist Richard Lapchick founded the *Center for the Study of Sport in Society* (CSSS) at Northeastern University in Boston. The center began to present data on the racial makeup of sport management, and in 1989 published its first annual *Racial Report Card*, a comprehensive statistical description of race in the hiring practices of the National Basketball Association, the National Football League, and Major League Baseball. Lapchick's national reputation and personal connections with former and current African American players in professional sports, led this document to receive nationwide media coverage; it also served to publicize continuing patterns of racial exclusion in sports and to put sport organizations on notice for their racialized personnel practices.

None of these data were used to generate and test theories of race relations, but they inspired speculation among many people, including those of us in the sociology of sport, about various explanations of this form of racial exclusion. These speculations have continued as data have been published annually since 1990.

## **CURRENT RESEARCH ON RACE, ETHNICITY, AND SPORTS**

The early research on entry barriers, racial stacking, and racial exclusion established that there were clear patterns of racial differentiation and stratification in U.S. sports and sport organizations. However, by the late 1980s it was apparent that this research added little to a critical theoretical understanding of race as a cultural construction, as a structure of power relations, as identity, and as a category of experience influenced by the material conditions of everyday life in a capitalist society. This was clearly pointed out in an influential essay written by Susan Birrell and published in the *Sociology of Sport Journal* in 1989. Birrell noted the following as she addressed colleagues in the field:

*We continue to produce studies on centrality and stacking, not because of their theoretical significance but because the data are there. Twenty years ago such studies provided major insight into stratification by race, and it is startling to know that such patterns persist today, but there is no theoretical news in this tradition. We need to move to more powerful questions. . . A more profound approach is to conceive of race as a culturally produced marker of a particular relationship of power, to see racial identity as contested, and to ask how racial relations are produced and reproduced through sport (1989: 214).*

Birrell's critique was part of an overall "cultural turn" in sociology and an emphasis on exploring the dynamics of cultural formation and the connections between culture and structure. Additionally, one of her observations was that research in the sociology of sport focused almost exclusively on the impact of racial discrimination on the participation of black males in sports; absent was research on (a) the experiences of women from ethnic minority backgrounds; (b) the intersections of race, gender, and class; and (c) ethnic dynamics apart from issues of race. Future research on race and sport, she

said, would benefit from “a blending of critical theories: cultural studies, socialist feminism, feminist cultural studies, materialist and cultural racial relations theories” (1989, p. 223).

Since Birrell’s critique, some scholars in the sociology of sport have continued to statistically document differential treatment and stratification related to race and ethnicity, but others have focused research attention on race and ethnicity as they are related to processes of cultural formation, power relations, identity politics, and the meanings given to sport-related phenomena and experiences. The methods used in the latter studies primarily include in-depth interviews, critical ethnography, historical analyses, and textual/semiotic analyses.

The research that has been done since 1990 is diverse, but it generally falls into three main categories. *First*, there are studies focusing on racial and ethnic differences and the existence of differential treatment and discrimination. These are mostly atheoretical but they document continuing manifestations of racism in U.S. sports. *Second*, there are studies focusing on the experiences of athletes from various ethnic minority backgrounds. Some of this research is purely descriptive, but much of it links experiences to identity, the dynamics of racial and ethnic relations in organizational and community contexts, the material conditions underlying identity formation and ethnic relations, and more general processes of cultural production and reproduction. *Third*, there are studies that focus on images and narratives, usually represented in the media, through which race and ethnicity is constructed, contested, and re-imagined over time and across social contexts. Most of these studies deal with the social construction of race and racial classification systems, the dynamics of racial ideology, and the appropriation of Native American names and images by sport teams. The following three sections present selected examples of research in each of these categories.

### **Difference and Discrimination**

As noted above, there is a strong tradition of research on difference and discrimination in the sociology of sport and related fields in the sport sciences. For example, recently published historical research documents the existence of racial politics and the changing contours of the color line through the twentieth century (Miller and Wiggins, 2004; Wiggins and Miller, 2003).

In 1997 John Hoberman published a “racial history of modern sport that explored the connections between sports, racial ideology, and biological racism during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Provocatively titled *Darwin’s Athletes*, the book was intended to document *race* as a dangerous, socially constructed myth and to show how sports have consistently served as sites for preserving dominant racial ideology, especially in the United States. In the absence of systematic data on the ways that African Americans have given meaning to and integrated sports and sport participation into their lives, Hoberman argued that “the cult of the black athlete [has] exacerbated the disastrous spread of anti-intellectual attitudes among African American youth” (p. xiii). Furthermore, he claimed that black intellectuals, especially black male scholars in the late-twentieth century, have failed to critique black athleticism thereby allowing the myth of race as well as popular ideas about black male physicality to be preserved in contemporary U.S. culture (pp. 76-95). Not surprisingly, Hoberman’s inference that blacks have perpetuated their own victimization was not well received by African American scholars. Despite his insightful

critique of racialist science and the role sports have played in the reproduction of racist ideas through the twentieth century, Hoberman's book has been cited with caution in the sociology of sport literature. However, it remains an important source of historical information about sports, the social construction of race, and the dynamics of dominant racial ideology in the United States.

Most research on difference and discrimination continues to focus on differential participation opportunities, often related to a combination of racism and constraints associated with social class and poverty, and on the dynamics of differential treatment and exclusion in particular sports and sport organizations. For example, Sailes (1998) and Brooks and Althouse (2000) have edited collections of research articles and commentaries that describe continuing racial myths and stereotypes, critique biological theories of race and athletic performance, and document the relative lack of ethnic minorities in coaching and administrative jobs in university athletic departments and the racism and sexism faced by African American women in college sports.

A primary source of data on patterns of racial and ethnic exclusion in the management positions of major sport organizations continues to be the annual *Racial and Gender Report Card* (gender was first included in the 1998 report; see <http://www.sportinsociety.org/rgrc.html>). Since 2002 this report has been published by the *Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sports* at the University of South Florida. The current report ([www.bus.ucf.edu/sport/public/downloads/media/ides/release\\_05.pdf](http://www.bus.ucf.edu/sport/public/downloads/media/ides/release_05.pdf)) includes data on women and all people of color in the major men's team sports (football, baseball, basketball, and hockey), the Women's National Basketball Association, and the National Collegiate Athletic Association. Future reports will include data from the motor sports industry and Olympic sport organizations in the United States.

Although the 2003 *Racial and Gender Report Card* included data on African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Asian Americans, there are few current sociological studies of difference and discrimination related to populations other than African Americans. This is not because people in these populations do not experience discrimination in sports. More likely, it is because ethnic stereotypes about each of these populations vary in content and how they are applied in sports. This makes it difficult to study issues of difference and discrimination except on a local level through qualitative research. Finally, it is important to note that the research on difference and discrimination has not been used as a basis for developing or testing theories of racial and ethnic relations.

### **Experiences among People in Racial and Ethnic Populations**

The extent of racial and ethnic diversity in the United States creates many research possibilities related to the sport experiences of people in different ethnic populations. Although most of this research has focused on African American men, there are studies describing the experiences of African American women and Latinos and Latinas. Only a few studies focus on Native Americans and the diverse Asian American populations in the United States.

Research on sport-related experiences ranges from descriptive to highly analytical, with the latter guided by a combination of theoretical frameworks. For example, Messner (1992) used critical feminist theory to guide his research on masculinity among men who were former elite athletes. His in-depth interviews indicated that because African

American men from low income backgrounds had fewer educational and occupational opportunities than white athletes from middle- and upper class families, they were more likely to see sports as contexts in which they could establish their masculinity and achieve success in a culturally valued activity. Additional studies have confirmed that black men in the U.S. often face a race logic that encourages them to give priority to sport-related identities. The extent to which this interferes with the development of other identities among African American men and unrealistically constrains developmental choices is difficult to study and there are no systematic data on this issue.

Researchers exploring the intersections of race and gender have found that the dynamics associated with racial ideology are different for black women than for black men (Corbett and Johnson, 2000; Daniels, 2000; Smith, 1992, 2000). In ideological terms, the bodies of black men have been socially constructed and viewed differently than the bodies of black women.

Other research on identity dynamics indicates that there is a diversity of traditions and norms associated with gender and sport participation for girls and women from Latino cultures (Acosta, 1999; Jamieson, 2003). Latinas whose families have recently immigrated to the U.S. receive less parental support to play sports, especially if participation is perceived as separating them from their traditional culture. Latinas from families that have been in the US for more than one generation are often encouraged by parents and other relatives to play whatever they wish, although they sometimes face the challenge of negotiating normative differences between the dominant and Latino cultures.

One of the most notable studies that links sport-related experiences to material conditions was done by French sociologist Loic Wacquant who spent over three years studying the social world of boxers in a ghetto gym in Chicago (1992; 1995a, b, c; 2004). His observations and interviews as well as his personal experiences as an apprentice boxer gave him unique access to the social logic and meanings associated with boxing as it is learned by men living in a black ghetto. Guided by Bourdieu's notion that "we learn by the body" and that "the social order inscribes itself in bodies," Wacquant immersed himself into the social world of a boxing gym. He explained that the gym he studied was organized in connection with destructive social forces present in the ghetto at the same time that it sheltered black men from the full negative impact of those forces. As the men trained at the gym they engaged in an intense regime of body regulation demanding physical, visual, and mental discipline. As boxing became central in their lives, they developed a "socialized lived body" that was at the very core of their identities and actions. For these men, boxing constituted a powerful socializing experience that cannot be understood apart from the cultural and structural contexts in which their training occurred.

Additional ethnographic studies have linked the sport-related experiences of ethnic minorities to larger community processes. For example, Foley (1990a, b) gave special attention to Mexicano-Anglo relations in his study of high school football in a south Texas town. He identified the working-class *vatos* (young Mexicano males) who rejected sport participation but used football games and other sport events to publicly display their "cultural style" and establish their social reputations in the community. Foley described cases in which Mexicanos in the local population used high school football as a site to resist the dominant culture of the town, but he concludes that Mexicano resistance was

largely symbolic and did not alter the prevailing culture and structure of power in the town.

Similar community dynamics were noted by Grey (1992) in his study of high school sports and relations between immigrants from Southeast Asia and the established residents of Garden City, Kansas. When students from immigrant families failed to participate in football, basketball, baseball, and softball, they were perceived by established residents as unwilling to become “true Americans.” This increased the marginalization of Asian students in the school and exacerbated ethnic tensions in the town. In contrast to Grey’s research there is anecdotal information indicating that third and fourth generation Asian American families are generally well integrated in many U.S. communities, play the same sports that others play, and even use sports participation as an expression of cultural assimilation and as a reaffirmation of social relationships with peers – but systematic research on such processes has not been done.

### **Images and Narratives**

The most provocative and theoretically rich research on race and sports has involved various forms of textual and semiotic analyses focusing on popular discourses representing athletes of color and on sports as sites for the construction of whiteness as a form of privilege. For example, scholars have used combinations of critical and postmodernist theories to study the complex connections between racial ideology, commodification, and “cultural stories” representing black athletes, especially Michael Jordan (Andrews, 1996a, b, 2001; Baker and Boyd, 1997). Critical studies scholar Todd Boyd explains that because sports and “the discourses that surround them, have become one of the master narratives of twentieth-century culture” they can be used as a barometer for assessing the American character (1997, p. ix). Cultural studies scholar David Andrews has built on this notion as he and his colleagues have deconstructed Michael Jordan and used representations of Jordan as a basis “for developing progressive understandings of the broader social, economic, political, and technological concerns that frame contemporary culture” (2001, p. xv). Andrews analyzes commercial advertising and other media coverage to explain how Jordan as a mediated icon represents “the convergence of corporate and media interests” and how Jordan has become “a cultural site around which particular neoconservative racial ideologies have been embodied and authorized” in late modern America (2001, p. xvii). African American Studies scholar Michael Eric Dyson, reading Jordan from a black cultural perspective concludes that even though Jordan was appropriated by corporate capitalism “his big, black body – graceful and powerful, elegant and dark – symbolizes the possibilities of other black bodies to remain safe long enough to survive within the limited but significant sphere of sport” (1993, p. 74). Jordan’s body, says Dyson, is “a fluid metaphor” that has been used to represent multiple conflicting desires.

Focusing more directly on the struggles over the significance of race and cultural meanings, some scholars in the sociology of sport have studied the dynamics and implications associated with the uniquely American practice of using Native American names and images as a basis for team names, logos, and mascots in interscholastic and professional sports (Davis, 1993; King, 2004; King and Springwood, 2001a, b). This practice is a legacy of centuries of Native-Euro-American relations through which whiteness has become normalized and native Americans and all people of color have



been cast as “others.” The concrete and highly visible logos and mascots used by sport teams have provoked activism as well as academic analysis (King, 2004). Analyses, grounded primarily in a framework of critical cultural studies, have focused on the cultural and structural dynamics involved as sport teams have resisted the objections of Native Americans and others who identify the names, logos, and mascots as offensive and racist. This research has made a significant contribution to the sociology of sport in that it has demonstrated “how racial difference animates much of the popular aesthetics of sport” (King and Springwood, 2001b, p. 12).

## Conclusion.

Research on sport, race, and ethnicity is important because the proportion of ethnic populations in the U.S. continues to increase relative to whites with European ancestry, and because professional and college teams often recruit athletes from Africa and Latin America. As of mid-2003, there were nearly 40 million Latinos in the U.S. population (14 percent); blacks numbered over 37 million (13 percent); people with Asian ancestry numbered 12 million (4 percent), and Native Americans numbered 2.8 million (1 percent). Demographic trends indicate that whites with European ancestry will constitute only 50% of the population in 2050, and they will be in a numerical minority in many U.S. states. If the color line was a dominant feature of the social and cultural landscape in the United States during the twentieth century, ethnic relations will be a dominant feature of the twenty-first century. The task in the sociology of sport will be to use sports as sites for theorizing and inspiring progressive forms of ethnic relations.

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