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Be Like Mike? De-constructing Race and Gender in African American College Athletics

Ed Taylor

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Introduction

While many segments of United States society remain racially segregated, African Americans have moved (as athletes) from the margin to the center of intercollegiate athletics, particularly in sports with the promise or potential for high revenue generation. In the process of athletic desegregation, race as an attribute has been rendered invisible. In contrast, gender and masculinity have been accentuated. The supposedly level playing field of athletics has allowed African Americans to become successful at sports. However, the way that race and gender are constructed in athletics impels African Americans, as role models, to diminish their racial identification and accentuate their masculinity. Those becoming too politically racialized often meet with public or organizational disapproval.

While many American boys would like to "Be Like Mike," few would likely choose to be Black. His appealing attributes are more masculine (power, success, and money). The purpose of this presentation is to provide conceptual clarity to theory, research, and discourse about race and gender in athletics. This paper will highlight the process of race and gender identity development to better understand student-athletes, their development, and the structures that impact them.

Theoretic Framework

Theorists in the field of racial identity development (Helms, 1990; Tatum, 1994) have described the psychological implications of racial group membership. This process assumes that the development of a racial identity inevitably occurs in a highly racialized society. It cannot account for the case when racial group membership is constructed in a way that downplays its impact, nor does it attend to the process of gender identification.

Although increased attention has been recently paid to male development and men's studies (Brod, 1987; Kimmel, 1987), much of current gender identity development theory remains untested. Messner (1995) asserts that the study of athletics is an ideal arena for study. His framework suggests that organized sports serve to embody the subordination of women though the masculinity it promotes may have significant race and class differences.

Method

Qualitative data from interviews with intercollegiate African American male athletes will

be presented. By studying the way race and gender identity intersect in African American male athletes, a more complete framework can be proposed. Further research that explores the impact of identity development and its relationship to institutionalized sports is called for.

This session should be of value to university and athletic administrators, faculty, students, and student-athletes. This session will be interactive and is not intended to generate interchange and discourse among participants.

PRESENTER

Ed Taylor is Assistant Professor in Higher Education and Policy Studies at the University of Washington in Seattle. Taylor's areas of research are critical race theory, educational leadership, and racial/gender identity development in athletes.