

# MERITOCRACY OR HYPOCRISY: MICROAGGRESSIVE PERCEPTIONS OF BLACK ATHLETES AT PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

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## ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

Dating as far back as the 1930s, the best Black athletes were into colleges' athletic circles. These Black-athletes find themselves at predominately White institutions (PWI) with very little support, surrounded by predominately White communities, and very little academic expectations. This is evident by the recent claims by a number of Black athletes that have filed lawsuits against academic institutions and/or the NCAA's concern for the quality of education they received. This paper examines microaggressions related to perceptions of meritocracy versus hypocrisy, towards Black athletes at predominately PWIs through the lens of the Critical Race Theory and the Racial Pseudo-Scientific Theory. Critical Race Theory underscores race as a social construct that contributes to discrimination, oppression, and subordination of minorities; and, the Racial Pseudo-Scientific Theory explores the Euro-American attitudes that Africans are inferior to Whites both intellectually and physically. This study will provide an analysis of the two theories within the context of racial microaggressions of Black athletes at predominantly White institutions.

## FULL TEXT

### Headnote

Abstract: Dating as far back as the 1930s, the best Black athletes were into colleges' athletic circles. These Black-athletes find themselves at predominately White institutions (PWI) with very little support, surrounded by predominately White communities, and very little academic expectations. This is evident by the recent claims by a number of Black athletes that have filed lawsuits against academic institutions and/or the NCAA's concern for the quality of education they received. This paper examines microaggressions related to perceptions of meritocracy versus hypocrisy, towards Black athletes at predominately PWIs through the lens of the Critical Race Theory and the Racial Pseudo-Scientific Theory. Critical Race Theory underscores race as a social construct that contributes to discrimination, oppression, and subordination of minorities; and, the Racial Pseudo-Scientific Theory explores the Euro-American attitudes that Africans are inferior to Whites both intellectually and physically. This study will provide an analysis of the two theories within the context of racial microaggressions of Black athletes at predominantly White institutions.

Keywords: Black male athlete; microaggressions; critical race theory; pseudoscientific theory; predominately White institutions

Athletics has served as a path for Black male economic and social equalizer for a long time. College athletics serves as the stepping stone for most of these athletes to get the exposure they need to give them an opportunity of grooming for future participation in professional sports. However, the role of athletics starts way before the Black male even begins to think about college. Families play a significant role in encouraging the dream of being a professional athlete at an extremely young age (Simiyu, 2009). Conversely, the chances are slim to none that this

dream will become a reality, but colleges and universities, potentially PWIs, profit from the exposure used through college athletics and sustaining this aspiration within the university environment. Making up only 2.8% of full-time undergraduate students in 2012, Black male student athletes comprised of 58.4% of the football and men's basketball in the six major NCAA Division I sports conferences (Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013). These conferences are represented by some of the premier and flagship institutions in America that are predominately White. In addition to the high representation in the major college athletic markets, the athletic expectations for Black athletes are much greater than White athletes by their coaches, professors, and peers (Simiyu, 2009). Sadly, the same expectations are not replicated in the area of academics leading many of the Black athletes to struggle academically. So are these practices and perceptions a true reflection meritocracy or microaggressions embedded into simple hypocrisy?

This paper examines microaggressions related to perceptions of meritocracy vs. hypocrisy, towards Black athletes at predominately White Institutions through the lens of the Critical Race Theory and the Racial Pseudo-Scientific Theory. Additionally, it will provide an analysis of the two theories within the context of racial microaggressions of Black athletes at predominantly White institutions and concluding with implications and recommendations for institutions to consider.

### Microaggressions

Microaggression has been affiliated with race, gender, and class. Sue and colleagues (2007) defined racial microaggression as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicates hostile, derogatory; negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group (p. 273). Racial microaggression is found to be more commonly used with Whites against Blacks and who do not understand the origin of racist or the impact of their behaviors (Constantine et al., 2008). Blacks experienced racial microaggressions from Whites in various types. Sue and colleagues (2007) described racial microaggression as microinvalidations, microinsults, and microassaults. Microinvalidations refer to "verbal comments or behaviors that exclude, negate, or dismiss the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of the target group" (p.112). Microinsults, which are "unintentional behaviors or verbal comments that convey rudeness or insensitivity or demean a person's heritage identity, gender identity, or sexual orientation identity" (p. 111). Finally, microassaults refer to "a blatant verbal, nonverbal, or environmental attack intended to convey discriminatory and biased sentiments" (p.111). Unlike microinsult and microinvalidation, which maybe unconscious and unintentional, microassault is done openly and under conscious awareness (Sue et al., 2007). There have been several types of microaggressions experienced by Blacks on campus including hypersexuality, aggressiveness, social class, and intelligence. In some cases, non-Black students appear to be interested in the ethnic differences of Black students such as hair, skin, language, food, etc. These non-White students are usually raised in environments with no or limited contact with Blacks. Due to this limited interaction Blacks tend to be excluded. They are subject to being objectified by non-Blacks who are curious of the unfamiliar or want to learn what things, which are racial stereotypes (Morales, 2014; Anderson, 2004). Being Black on PWI campuses indicates these students are athletes and were accepted for their athletic ability rather than their intellectual ability. With this idea Black athletes are seen to be knowledgeable about "Black dominated sports" like basketball and football (Morales, 2014).

Morales (2014) examined microaggressions in the form of hypersexuality. She points out that blacks are viewed as overly sexual, yet another stereotype. This stereotype can cause Black men to be cautious around non-Black females due to the fear of being accused of rape or inappropriate sexual behavior (Anderson, 2012). As a double jeopardy, many Blacks of low SES backgrounds are perceived to be violent. The development of such fear has been historical justified for killing Black men or severely punishing them for simply speaking to White women and/or looking at them. For Black women, this hypersexuality is seen as them being promiscuous or serving as "sex object". As with Black men, Black women have historically been the victims of physical, verbal, and sexual violence by White men (Davis, 2011; Morales, 2014).

Aggressiveness of Black males has also triggered a microaggression on PWI campuses. Black males are viewed

as violent and aggressive. Collins (2005) contributes this stereotype to the images of Black males being portrayed as criminal, poor, and "street hustlers". As a result of this portrayal Black men are seen as threats needing more scrutiny and monitoring by security. In a study by Morales, Black participants reported unfair treatment by campus security, which included frequent identification checks, limited access to campus areas, and increased security where mostly Blacks are gathered (2014).

Microaggressions can take a toll on a person's mental process. Blacks affected by an environment inducted with microaggressions have been found to impact them physically, psychologically, and emotionally (Franklin, Boy, & Franklin, 2000; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2000). Individuals who have experienced racial microaggression were more likely to experience negative symptoms of mental illness. They also may have a negative view of the world. Scholars established a correlation between the type of microaggression and mental health symptoms, specifically when Blacks are being racially invalidated (Nadal et al., 2014). Racial microaggressions can lead to limited involvement and feelings of isolation on campuses (Smith et al., 2007; Solorzano et al, 2000; Comeaux, 2010) and contribute to higher dropout rates (Torres, Driscoll, & Burrow, 2010).

At PWIs, Black students were found to experience oppression and discrimination on a daily basis (Smith et al., 2002). The students perceive the campus environment as racist and were subjected to unfair practices when compared to their White counterparts (Rankin & Reason, 2005). Clopton (2010) noted that in the U.S. racial discrimination is prevalent within colleges and sports programs. The negative perceptions of Blacks have been found not only among White students, but also among faculty and administrators (Melendez, 2008).

#### The Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) underscores race, as a social construct, contributes to the discrimination, oppression, and subordination of minorities (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004; Dixon & Rousseau, 2005). Furthermore, as Ladson-Billings (1998) states, CRT examines the institutional structure and the law where race appears to be neutralized can contribute to inequalities in education. CRT first surfaced in the 1970's as a basis for legal vocabulary, literature, and scholarship. There are six common unifying themes of CRT: 1) CRT identifies the concept that racism is endemic to American life; 2) CRT blatantly expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy; 3) CRT requires that one contextually analyze the law and it insists that Critical Race theorists adopt a paradigm that presumes racism has contributed to all contemporary manifestations of race's advantage or disadvantage; 4) CRT maintains that an individual must recognize the experiential knowledge of people of color along with their communities of origin when analyzing both the law and society; 5) CRT must be understood to be interdisciplinary; and finally, 6) CRT exists in hopes to eliminate racial oppression as well as all forms of oppression (Dixon & Rousseau, 2005).

The perspectives of Black male athletes in higher education are almost nonexistent in the research concerning their academic challenges, success, and developmental processes (Majors & Billson, 1992; Ross, 1998). CRT is important because this theoretical framework recognizes, appreciates and values the importance of the perspectives of people outside the dominant culture. CRT, as a part of the conceptual framework of this study provides an important intersection by relying heavily upon shifting, which is otherwise considered to be normal in American life (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Osiris (2005) applied the CRT to the experience of Black males at traditionally White institutions (TWI) and concluded that African American male academic success is more closely related to their overall collegiate experience and sense of belonging as opposed to their academic ability. African American males are more prone to experience academic failure when their experiences at TWIs are devalued or disconnected to campus life. McCabe (2009) utilized CRT to investigate racial and gender aggressions on the experiences of Black, Latino and White undergraduate students at a PWI. This research explored patterns of microaggressions affect the target populations, and factors utilized to overcome these limitations. The study findings revealed that student bonding forms support structures and institutional initiatives that play a keen role in helping students overcome the microaggressions they face.

The present study utilizes CRT as one of two theoretical frameworks because it supports the investigation of how

racial microaggressions including discrimination, racism, and oppression affect the life experiences of Black male athletes in higher education. This research hopes to connect CRT with multiple factors that help Black male athletes at PWIs overcome potential obstacles that hinder their academic success in higher education.

#### Pseudo-Scientific Theory

Carolus Linnaeus, known as the "Father of Taxonomy", believed it was important to develop a classification system to group species. His system had similarities to modern racial classification composed of African, Caucasian, Asian, and Native American. It categorizes characteristics between these races. For example, it viewed Europeans (Caucasians) as having more positive characteristics such as being gentle and innovative and showed Africans with negative characteristics such as lazy and negligent (Uppsala Universitete, 2008). The idea of White superiority has been influenced by science, supporting racial superiority, and the system of hierarchy. This theory was applied in Germany and in the United States forming the pseudo-scientific theories. In the 19th century, much criticism has been made on "pseudo-science" on the basis of questionable scientific results where scientists flawed data illustrating racial biases (Sundquist, 2009). The scientific aspect of racial differences was used to justify the self-supporting idea of "White superiority" and in turn maintaining a racial classification system. The use of biologically supported intellectual differences between Blacks and Whites with cranial comparisons and facial features to suggest Whites were more intelligent than Blacks falls under the Pseudo-Scientific Theory (Sundquist, 2009). Researchers Entine (2000) and Rushton (2000) categorized athleticism from both a sociological perspective. They divided athleticism into two themes contributing to athletic success. One theme focused on a biological aspect while the second theme is centered on environmental influences. These themes are based on the premise of the theory of nature versus nurture. From the biological aspect, athletic performance is attributed to genetics such as muscle development and hormones, whereas the environmental aspect is influenced by social factors, such as socioeconomics and culture (Comeaux & Harrison, 2004; May, 2009; Johnson et al., 1999). These themes are related to racial differences just as indicated in previous studies (Entine, 2000; Sundquist, 2009). Although research has not found significant correlations between genetic factors and athletic performance, the biological perspective does reflect the pseudo-scientific theory (Carter et. al., 2010).

Harrison, Lawrence and Bukstein (2011) conducted a study where White college students' explained the differences of White and Black athletic performance. Many respondents did not view genetics as a factor of athletic performance. They viewed athletic performance as a cultural determinant. For example, Whites were raised with more of an academic focus whereas Blacks were prone to link sports to financial success also reflecting the impact of their socioeconomic status (SES). In other words, Whites grow up in an economically affluent environment where academics are stressed for economic success and Blacks are raised in low-income environments equating athletic success with financial attainment (Harrison, Lawrence & Bukstein, 2011; Coakley, 2010). Contrary to these results, a 2014 study found that the athleticism of Blacks was not based on their economic level, but was most likely based on the natural talents of the Black athletes (Morales, 2014). Over half of the participants in a 2011 study believed Blacks came from lower SES than Whites. Evidently, 17% of participants attributed African Americans superiority to genetic factors and 58% contributed White inferiority to cultural factors (Harrison, Lawrence & Bukstein, 2011). This view demonstrates a stereotype of Blacks indicating a thought of inferiority of Blacks to Whites reflecting the pseudo-scientific theory.

#### Black Athletes on PWI Campuses

Research demonstrated a stronger focus on athletes than academics in many colleges (Eitzen, 2009 & Gerdy, 2006). Coaches of student athletes tend to devalue academics and place emphasis on athletic performance in an effort to win games. They tend to promote student athletes take what is considered easier courses to pass or take professors who are more flexible in turn increasing their likeliness to pass courses helping them to maintain their playing eligibility status (Eitzen, 2009). These students have been given special consideration, which in some cases have resulted into violations such as cheating on exams and additional assistance with the completion of coursework (Eitzen, 2009; Coakley, 2006). This is especially evident in Division I colleges.

Although there have been stereotypes and perceptions of student athletes, there is an apparent difference

between Black and White athletes at institutions. In a 2008 study by Melendez, Black students have been reportedly treated negatively and disrespected by both Black and White classmates as well as teammates. This treatment has caused them feelings of isolation and rejection. As discrimination has been found to exist with Black students, microaggressions have been demonstrated by unfair treatment, subtle racial comments, and threats (Smith et al., 2002), which students have reportedly experienced at least once a week (Swim et al, 2003). In a 2010 study by Dee, Black athletes reported to have received lower grades, along with accusations and suspicions of cheating and difficulty with being assisted after missing time in class when away representing the institution at athletic events. This is unfortunate because despite their athletic performances, many of these athletes go to college with the goal of graduating at the forefront and consider it as a higher priority than athletics. Several studies have supported that Black student athletes have been exploited by intercollegiate athletics of institutions in order to obtain financial benefits (Donnor, 2005; Melendez, 2008). According to Clopton (2011), within college campuses there is a separation with race and athlete status. This separation can increase the negative impact of both academic and social outcomes of the students. Black male student athletes reported classmates use microaggressions due to their status of being Black and an athlete to make them inferior academically and separated by teammates and coaches. This can be identified in forms of microaggression (Melendez, 2008).

Due to this division, negative attitudes and perceptions have been developed in regards to the academic performance of student athletes in Division I schools. Division I White male student athletes view Black student athletes as academically unprepared and/or not as intelligent as White student athletes (Sailes, 1993). Although research has showed no evidence of intellectual inferiority of Black student athletes, the prejudice remains within academia (Harrison et al, 2009; Martin & Harris, 2006; Simon, 2006).

In a 2010 study Comeaux examined the racial differences in faculty perceptions of student athletes. As racial differences and microaggressions are a true reality for Black student athletes, faculty recognized how these have a negative effect on these students "learning and personal development" (Davis, 1995). Previous research supported that Black athletes had difficulty in academic performance contributing to lack of educational involvement, athletic demands, and dealing with the racial maltreatment on campuses (Benson, 2000, Comeaux, 2010; Comeaux & Harris, 2007). Another research study indicated faculty was found to have lower academic expectations for Black student athletes than their White teammates, although they also recognized the inequalities between the two (Comeaux, 2010). The study further demonstrated the faculty viewed White student athletes who graduated as a normalcy when compared to their Black counterparts as an accomplishment for being disadvantaged. Some faculty tended to use affirmative action to justify the reasons for these students graduated or were accepted to their institutions indicative of faculty viewing Black students as inferior to Whites (Comeaux, 2010).

Cultural disconnections and stereotyping are racial microaggressions that have an overwhelming impact on the Black student athlete as well. Racism and cultural disparities for Black student athletes at PWIs are frequently documented in the literature. Steele (1992) concluded that Black males are stereotyped and at a disadvantage before even arriving on campus due to society's portrayal of the Black male in general. Other microaggressions such as identification labels of being at-risk in education (Cuyjet, 2006) also have an impact on how the Black male student athletes are perceived on PWI campuses. As a result social identity becomes interconnected with the microaggressions and negative stereotypes, anxiety sits in, and these students' performance is affected (Dancy, 2009).

#### Implications & Recommendations

Minority students experiencing racial microaggressions are met with hostility and discriminatory treatment. Researchers have found a correlation with Black students who had a social support and were able to discuss their unfair treatment had higher grade point averages compared to those Black students who did not share their experiences (Powell & Arriola, 2003; Zea, Jarama & Bianchi, 1995; Ponteretti, Reynolds, & Cancelli, 2000). The need for Black students to have their psychological and intellectual needs met are a necessity for their academic success. This is consistent with a study by Comeaux (2010), which faculty reported Black student athletes needed



to be provided with the same access to participate in academic opportunities and receive fair treatment with institutional practices and education to improve their success.

There is a major need for institutions to identify the aforementioned racial microaggressions and negative perceptions of Black male student athletes in education especially in predominantly White academic settings. This is not only restricted to faculty, staff, and administration, but to the student population as well. This can be embodied by creating a more culturally inclusive environment. This may include cultural competence and diversity trainings to address racial biases, hiring minority faculty, staff, and administrators to help diversify the campus. Institutions need to charter student organizations that will be inclusive of minorities such as fraternities, sororities, academic honor societies, etc. Due to the various dynamics and needs of each campus, it will be the best to assess and gather data from the students to drive these particular practices.

In addition to a culturally inclusive environment, it is important to properly orient students to the culture of higher education who are minorities, especially those who are a minority with multiple aspects like the Black male student athlete. Preparing these student athletes for the transition can be instrumental in their academic development and success. The transition to college alone can be overwhelming, but as a Black male student athlete on a PWI campus it is even more critical. During this orientation the expectations on and off the field should be specified. Additionally, the locations of academic and social resources are necessary for the increase of accessibility to support system within the campus environment. Lastly, a plan of action for degree completion should be developed for accountability purposes of the student athlete. These students must know and understand that as a student athlete there are still expectations from the institution of them obtaining a degree. Encouraging faculty engagement and positive interaction both inside and outside the classroom must also be a part of this equation. Faculty play a vital role in a student's academic success, but it is even more vital to the student athlete. A part of this interaction between faculty and Black male student athlete is the importance of expectations. Historically, faculty expectations of minority students and athletes are usually not at the same level as they are for other students. The low academic expectations of Black athletes are one of the clear implications of the microaggressions highlighted with this paper. Faculty must hold Black athletes to the same high academic standards they hold for all students. Ideally, to support the success of the Black student athlete faculty must have higher expectations and be more interactive and academically involved with the student athlete. This holds true for the athletic departments and administrators, ensuring these students are in a conducive and safe environment, but also they are treated as a student first and receive the maximum resources to support their academic success. These implications and recommendations are not absolutes. As stated earlier, each institution will need to evaluate their current structure, but these recommendations can serve as a starting point for eliminating racial microaggressions against Black male student athletes and a sure way to begin to improve academic and institutional practices in an effort to create a safer and fair environment for all students and student athletes alike. As there are several studies focused on microaggressions and Blacks, more longitudinal studies need to be conducted on the impact of microaggression on Black student athletes after matriculation. These studies can explore the vocational, social, cognitive, and psychological effects. Additional studies can also explore how various colleges and universities address issues of racism on not only PWI, but also Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). As with PWIs, HBCUs have nonBlack students who may subsequently being faced with similar issues as those addressed in this paper

## Conclusions

This paper presented the Critical Race Theory and the Racial Pseudo-Scientific Theory to discuss the microaggressions related to perceptions of meritocracy versus hypocrisy towards Black athletes at predominately White institutions. The microaggressions examined included hypersexuality, aggressiveness, social class, and intelligence. The noted microaggressions are commonly used against Black male student athletes on PWIs in the U.S. This population is not only affected because of race, but also because they are athletes. As a result, many Black student athletes have internalized the concept of being inferior to other students as it pertains to academic ability and ultimately the ability to successfully matriculate and graduate from these institutions.

Given the disproportionate number of Black male athletes that are not graduating from PWIs, it is clear the institutions must act with some intentionality to correct this problem. It is the responsibility of all constituents of the university to create and implement policies and guidelines that will eliminate unfair discriminatory practices causing racial barriers that will create a learning environment allowing Black male student athletes to succeed academically. Administrators and faculty alike must be willing to provide Black male student athletes with the resources, high academic expectations, and respect as all other students of the university. Concurrently, psychological support should be provided to support them as they transition into the campus environment and prepare to handle and overcome the microaggressions they will face while on campus. As noted in the paper, Black male student athletes tend to suffer from mental health issues such as depression, isolation, and anxiety as a result of their experiences with microaggressions.

If educational leaders, stakeholders, and elected officials do not work to address the current trends and develop effective strategies to help Black male athletes as well as other minority athletes minimize and essentially eliminating the concept of microaggressions, the future could become even worse than current academic success rates. It is the hope of these authors that this paper and subsequent research can play a role in developing plans of action to help more Black male athletes succeed academically and athletically at PWIs.

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doi:10.1007/BF02506966

## DETAILS

<b>Subject:</b>	Black Americans; African Americans; Oppression; Meritocracy; Colleges; Black college students; Ethnic groups; Subordination; Racism; Minority groups; Race; Colleges &universities; Critical theory; Athletes; Black athletes; Blacks; Discrimination
<b>Company / organization:</b>	Name: National Collegiate Athletic Association--NCAA; NAICS: 813990
<b>Publication title:</b>	Race, Gender &Class; New Orleans
<b>Volume:</b>	24
<b>Issue:</b>	3/4
<b>Pages:</b>	132-144
<b>Publication year:</b>	2017
<b>Publication date:</b>	2017
<b>Publisher:</b>	Race, Gender and Class
<b>Place of publication:</b>	New Orleans
<b>Country of publication:</b>	United States, New Orleans

<b>Publication subject:</b>	Multi-Ethnic, Women's Studies, Men's Studies, Ethnic Interests
<b>ISSN:</b>	10828354
<b>Source type:</b>	Scholarly Journals
<b>Language of publication:</b>	Engl ish
<b>Document type:</b>	Journal Article
<b>ProQuest document ID:</b>	2119846751
<b>Document URL:</b>	https://search.proquest.com/docview/2119846751?accountid=14169
<b>Copyright:</b>	Copyright Race, Gender and Class 2017
<b>Last updated:</b>	2018-10-16
<b>Database:</b>	Ethnic NewsWatch,GenderWatch

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