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Foul Play: How Racism in the NCAA Contributes to the Mental Health and Academic Performance of College Athletes of Color

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Foul Play: How Racism in the NCAA Contributes to the Mental Health and Academic
Performance of College Athletes of Color

A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in Forensic Psychology
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This Thesis has been presented to and accepted by the Office of Graduate Studies, John Jay College of Criminal Justice in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Forensic Psychology.

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Introduction

The Exploitation of College Athletes

On the surface, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) provides a golden opportunity to young and talented athletes across the globe by awarding them with scholarships to attend prestigious colleges. These scholarships allow students to continue their athletic careers while not having to worry about the finances involved with obtaining academic degrees. However, because fewer than 2% of college-athletes will be scouted to play professionally (NCAA, 2014) and over half of Black athletes will not graduate with a degree (Hosick & Durham, 2017), it has been questioned whether or not the NCAA is exploiting the talents of their athletes. This system has even been referred to as the “New Plantation,” as college coaches at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) can make millions of dollars coaching sports where Black athletes are overrepresented (e.g., basketball and football), while the athletes make nothing for the long hours they spend practicing and competing (Hawkins, 2010, p. 15).

For example, basketball and football programs at Division I colleges are now reportedly multi-million dollar enterprises. Coaches’ salaries at these institutions average at just below a million dollars, with some football and basketball coaches making well over eight million (Berkowitz et al., 2020; Gardner, 2021). College sports games are often televised and used as entertainment that colleges are able to make large profits off of. In fact, from 1996 to 2013, NCAA TV revenues made up 80% of NCAA’s annual revenues (Roebuck et al., 2014; Murty & Roebuck, 2015). Furthermore, athletes on high revenue-generating teams, such as football and basketball, have been found to generate enough revenue to fund their schools’ entire athletics departments and their coaches’ salaries (Yearwood, 2018),

Because Black student-athletes are overrepresented on these high revenue-generating teams and less than half graduate with a degree (Hosick & Durham, 2017), they are more affected by this system of exploitation than their White counterparts (Roebuck et al., 2014). For example, the graduation rate of White student-athletes is nearly 20% higher than the graduation rate of Black student-athletes (Hosick & Durham, 2017). This indicates that there is a systemic problem in how the NCAA is operating since sports where Black student-athletes are overrepresented generate the most revenue, yet the majority of Black student-athletes at these schools are not receiving a degree in return, essentially playing with no gain (Murty & Roebuck, 2015).

For instance, Van Rheenen (2011) found in a sample of 581 Division 1 college athletes that nearly 33% of them reported feeling exploited by their colleges. Athletes in high revenue-generating sports, such as basketball and football, were seven times more likely to report feeling exploited than their peers on lower revenue-generating teams. In addition, Black student-athletes were more likely than White student-athletes to report feelings of exploitation (Van Rheenen, 2011). It was noted that even non-revenue generating athletes reported feeling exploited, signaling that these feelings are more than simply being related to how much money an athlete generates and what they receive in return (Van Rheenen, 2011). Similarly, Beamon (2008) found in a sample of former Division I athletes that Black football and basketball athletes reported feeling like “used goods” by their institutions.

This is an important finding in light of recent events, where the NCAA is now allowing student-athletes to benefit financially off of their name, image, and likeness (NIL) (Hosick, 2021). This means that student-athletes are now allowed to accept sponsorships, monetize their social media accounts, and sell autographs for monetary gain. While this appears to be a step in

the right direction, colleges are *still* making millions from their athletes and are *still* not paying their athletes. Instead, the responsibility for earning outside compensation now falls squarely on athletes.

Racism and The Biopsychosocial Model

Because most research concerning racism and mental health in students of color has focused on those who are not athletes, not much is known about the unique racial experiences that student-athletes of color may face in both academic and athletic settings, and how this may impact mental health and academic success. Nevertheless, the biopsychosocial model can serve as a framework for understanding how racism might potentially impact a student-athlete of color's mental health and academic performance. The biopsychosocial model proposes that exposure to stressors, such as racism, can negatively impact a person biologically, mentally, and socially (Clark et al., 1999). For example, it has been found that psychological responses following exposure to a racial stressor can include anxiety, anger, and helplessness, all of which could influence the development of a long-term mental health problem, such as depression (Clark et al., 1999).

Additionally, Carter et al. (2016) was interested in studying how the three classes of racism (avoidant, hostile, and/or aversive-hostile) identified by Carter (2007) were related to symptoms of race-based traumatic stress (anger, depression, hypervigilance, etc.). It was found that the class of racism experienced plays a prominent role in what symptoms of race-based traumatic stress are exhibited, with stress from hostile racism being most correlated with anger and stress from avoidant racism being most correlated with depression (Carter et al., 2016). These classes of racism are important to note and understand when studying the effects of racial experiences of student-athletes because as seen in Carter et al. (2016), it is possible that specific

types of racism are correlated differently with the mental health and academic performances of student-athletes of color.

The first class of racism as defined by Carter (2007) is avoidant racism. Avoidant racism refers to behavior meant to maintain distance between dominant and non-dominant racial groups. This could include exclusion of members of a certain racial group, as well as withholding information or deception. The second class is hostile racism, which refers to actions meant to communicate to a person that they are inferior because of their membership in a particular racial group. This could include physical, verbal assaults or being treated as a stereotype. Aversive-hostile racism is the last class of racism, referring to hostile-like behavior meant to create distance and communicate to a person that they are not accepted, even if they have gained access to an organization or institution. This could include being isolated at work, having qualifications questioned, and not being recognized for work and achievements (Carter, 2007; Carter et al., 2016).

These three classes of racism appear to show up in the reported racial experiences of student-athletes of color. For example, student-athletes of color may experience being the target of racial slurs said by teammates, coaches, “fans”, or members of rival teams, which is a demonstration of hostile racism (Beamon, 2014). Black male student-athletes have also commonly reported being racially stereotyped on campus as “dumb jocks,” which additionally falls under the category of hostile racism (Murty & Roebuck, 2015). Black student-athletes may also be more likely to be penalized in games by referees, an example of aversive-hostile racism (Dix, 2019).

Reports of these experiences are higher at PWIs than they are at HBCUs, which is unsurprising considering the racial makeup of student bodies at HBCUs (i.e. on average, only

17% of students at HBCUs identify as a race other than Black; Anderson, 2017) and the research showing that people of color are more likely to perceive racism in environments that are mostly White (Assari & Lankarani, 2018; Hawkins, 2010). In fact, a survey of former Division I Black athletes from PWIs showed that these athletes *expect* to face racial discrimination in college. They reported feeling stereotyped by their college: that if a student was Black, everyone assumed they were only there to play sports (Beamon, 2014). Similarly, Melendez (2008) found that Black undergraduate football players reported feeling mistrustful and judged by their teammates and coaches. There is also evidence that umpires and referees can unfairly discriminate against Black student-athletes. A statistical analysis of personal fouls that were called in women's Division I college basketball from 2008 to 2017 showed that referees were more likely to call personal fouls on athletes that represented HBCUs than other types of institutions. HBCUs were the most penalized women's college basketball teams during this time (Dix, 2019).

While racism can be experienced at both PWIs and HBCUs (Dix, 2019; Beamon, 2014), having a sense of belonging could potentially moderate the effects racism may have on an individual's wellbeing. At HBCUs - an environment that can be culturally affirming (e.g., building names, college events, student organizations) -, Black female athletes have reported a greater sense of belonging to their college than their peers attending PWIs (Cooper & Newton, 2021). For instance, in a qualitative study, Cooper and Newton (2021) found several reemerging sentiments in Black female athletes attending HBCUs, with one theme being that HBCUs feel "more like a family." It is possible that having such a supporting environment would mitigate the effects of racism on an athlete's mental health. In fact, Hunter et al. (2017) found in a sample of African Americans with high levels of race related stress that having a greater sense of racial belonging was related with lower depression. Nevertheless, more research is needed to

understand how a specific type of college campus (e.g., PWI or MSI) can increase a sense of belonging for student-athletes of color.

Racial Segregation and Feelings of Isolation

Similar to how Black student-athletes are at risk for experiencing many forms of racism, they are also more likely to report feelings of isolation than White student-athletes (Beamon, 2014; Melendez, 2008; Hawkins, 2010). These feelings of isolation have been found to be greater at PWIs, where Black athletes are often overrepresented on sports teams, but are not equally represented on campus (Hawkins, 2010; Roebuck, Murty, & McCamey, 2014).

While Black students - athletes and non-athletes alike - report higher levels of feelings of isolation at PWIs (Patterson, 2021; Beamon, 2014; Cooper & Cooper, 2015), the unique everyday experiences and obligations of student-athletes may make them more susceptible to feelings of isolation. For example, oftentimes student-athletes dorm together in separate areas from non-athlete students. The athletes spend hours training with one another and also frequently dine together. Because of the many hours athletes spend with their teammates, some reporting up to 40 hours a week, it is important that their team is a positive environment that they feel accepted in. However, it has been found that this is often not the case as Black student-athletes have reported feeling segregated from their White teammates within the locker rooms and on the bus rides to games (Beamon, 2014). These experiences are correlated with increased feelings of alienation and isolation in Black and Hispanic student-athletes (Hawkins, 2010; Bernhard, 2014). Even when in class, Black student-athletes at PWIs have reported feeling that their White classmates avoid them and assume that Black students are only there on sports scholarships (Hawkins, 2010; Murty & Roebuck, 2015).

Academic Achievement Disparity

Being able to compete in a sport one loves while also receiving a full scholarship to a prestigious college seems like a promising bargain, especially when the NCAA proudly boasts that the graduation rates of student-athletes are higher than the rates of non-student athletes (Hosick & Durham, 2017). However, these rates are far from impressive when broken down by race. Across all athletic divisions, White athletes - both male and female - have graduation rates that, on average, are at least 17 percentage points higher than Black student-athletes. For example, White Division III athletes have a graduation rate of 72%. On the other hand, Black Division III athletes have a graduation rate of 48.5% (Hosick & Durham, 2017). Additionally, 59% of Black basketball players and 50% of Black football players did not graduate in 2011 (Hawkins, 2010). In fact, the only athletic division with a graduation rate higher than 50% for Black student-athletes is Division I, albeit the graduation rate is still substantially lower for Black student-athletes when compared to White student-athletes in this division (e.g. 59% and 73%, respectively; Hosick & Durham, 2017).

It is important to consider why there is a substantial gap in the graduation rates between Black and White student-athletes and past research has indicated that feelings of exploitation, racial discrimination, and lack of freedom over classes affects academic performance (Simons & Van Rheezen, 2000; Murty & Roebuck, 2015). For example, Simons & Van Rheezen (2000) found in a sample of college athletes that as feelings of exploitation by their institution increased, their GPAs decreased. Additionally, Van Rheezen (2011) found that Division I Black student-athletes playing on high-revenue generating teams reported higher feelings of exploitation than their peers on Division II and III teams.

Similarly, there is evidence that student-athletes at Division I schools are not given full authority over their education, and are often pushed to take “easy” classes (Murty & Roebuck, 2015; Logan & Harrison, 2017; Yearwood, 2018). For example, Logan and Harrison (2017) found that Black Division I football players at PWIs are oftentimes left out of decisions made around what classes they can take, what majors they can choose, and how much time they can spend on academics. This finding shows up repeatedly in the literature, with Black student-athletes reporting feeling guided into taking easy classes taught by “sports-friendly” professors that do not require a lot of homework or outside studying (Murty & Roebuck, 2015). In other cases, Black student-athletes have been told by their professors that they are not “real” students, and that they are only there to play sports. This lack of a positive relationship with professors was cited as the primary contributor to their low levels of academic engagement in a sample of Black student-athletes at a Division I PWI (Cooper & Cooper, 2015). Furthermore, experiences of racial stereotyping and discrimination in academic settings have been found to be correlated with lower GPAs, with Black student-athletes having GPAs that are on average .21 points lower than White student-athletes (Upthegrove et al., 1999).

Impact on Mental Health

The pressures student-athletes face, such as balancing schoolwork, practice, and social life, have been found to make them more vulnerable to developing eating disorders and abusing substances (Sundgot-Borgen, & Torstveit, 2004; Martens et al., 2006). Additionally, nearly 75% of mental disorders develop by the mid twenties (Kessler et al., 2007). These factors, coupled with the addition of race-related stress, could make student-athletes of color more vulnerable to developing mental health problems. In fact, nearly 78% of racial and ethnic minority student-athletes have reported the need for mental health services (Ballesteros & Tran, 2020).

Unfortunately, the literature on how racism affects the mental health of student-athletes of color is scarce, though it is growing. In a recent longitudinal study looking at mental health trends in student-athletes, it was found that race does play a role in the mental health of student-athletes. For example, while being a White student-athlete seemed to benefit an individual's mental health, it was the opposite for student-athletes of color. Asian, Pacific Islander, and multiracial student-athletes were at heightened risk for depression and suicide compared to their White counterparts (Tran, 2020). These findings, with the addition of literature involving non-athlete students of color and professional athletes of color, show the need to further research in this area in order to protect those at risk.

For example, racial discrimination has been found to be positively correlated with depressive symptoms and problematic alcohol use in Black college students at PWIs (Barry et al., 2017; Desalu et al., 2019). Additionally, Hwang and Goto (2008) found in a sample of Asian and Latino college students that racial discrimination was positively correlated with psychological distress, suicidal ideation, anxiety, and depression. Similarly, it has also been found in a sample of former NFL players that Black males were 50% more likely than White males to have indicators of depression and indicators of anxiety (Roberts et al., 2020). Because the literature shows that student-athletes of color are vulnerable to experiencing racism (Hawkins, 2010; Beamon, 2014; Bimper, 2015; Fuller, 2017), the findings on non-athlete students of color and professional athletes of color support the idea that student-athletes of color could be at risk for developing mental health problems.

Current Study

College students of color have reported experiencing racial discrimination on campus and it is known that racism can have a negative impact on mental health and academic performance

(Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Barry et al., 2017). However, the literature on the specific experiences of student-athletes of color is much more limited. While the literature shows Black college-athletes are vulnerable to racial discrimination, feelings of isolation, and feelings of institutional exploitation, there is a gap in the literature in knowing how this affects their mental health and academic performance, as well as how it affects other student-athletes of color (Hawkins, 2010; Van Rheenen, 2011; Van Rheenen, 2013; Murty & Roebuck, 2015; Beamon, 2014; Fuller, 2017). Nevertheless, the biopsychosocial model provides a theoretical framework that could explain the relationship between these variables.

Because Black student-athletes have lower graduation rates than White student-athletes (Hosick & Durham, 2017), it is important to understand why this is and how racism and feelings of institutional exploitation can play a role. The purpose of this study is to understand how racism (in academic and athletic settings) is associated with the mental health and academic performances of student-athletes of color, as well as with feelings of isolation and feelings of exploitation. Consistent with previous research on racism, mental health, and academic performance in college students of color (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Barry et al., 2017), it is hypothesized that:

- I. There will be a positive correlation between racism and the mental health variables, and a negative correlation between racism and academic performance.
- II. There will be a positive correlation between racism and feelings of isolation and exploitation.
- III. Racism will significantly predict the mental health and academic performances of student-athletes of color.

Method

Participants included 34 current and 28 former student-athletes (N = 62) of color from Division I, II, and III schools. Division I and II athletes featured the highest percentage of African American/Black athletes while Division III featured the highest percentage of Hispanic-American athletes (see Table 3). To be eligible for the study, former student-athletes must have competed at an NCAA institution within the last three years. Based on their athletic status (current or former athlete), certain survey items appeared in present or past tense when applicable. IRB approval was obtained prior to recruiting.

To recruit participants, the link to the Qualtrics survey was posted on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram. The survey link was also emailed to student-athletes attending City Universities of New York (CUNYs). The CUNY athletic departments were responsible for sending the survey link to all student-athletes via email. Student-athletes that consented and completed the full online survey were included in data analysis.

Of the 62 athletes, 26 (42.0%) were Division I athletes, 12 (19.4%) were Division II athletes, and 24 (39.0%) were Division III athletes. As seen in Table 1, the majority (57%) of participants indicated that they attended a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). Participants were asked to indicate their race (African American/Black = 38.7%, Multiracial/ethnic = 22.6%, Hispanic-American = 17.7%, Southeast Asian = 11.3%, East Asian = 6.5%, Middle Eastern = 1.6%, and Native American = 1.6%), their age (mean = 21.37 years), their gender (Man = 50%, Woman = 45.2%, Non-binary/Trans = 3.2%, and 1.6% chose not to answer). Fifty-six percent of the sample indicated that they do or did receive an athletic scholarship, and the remaining 44% did not. Participants indicated participation in a wide range of sports, with 20 participants identifying as multisport athletes (see Table 2).

Table 1*Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

| | <i>n</i> | <i>%</i> | | <i>n</i> | <i>%</i> |
|------------------------|----------|----------|------------------------------|----------|----------|
| Race/Ethnicity | | | Type of Institution Attended | | |
| African American/Black | 24 | 38.7 | PWI | 35 | 57 |
| East Asian | 4 | 6.5 | HBCU | 3 | 5 |
| Hispanic-American | 11 | 17.7 | HSI | 4 | 6 |
| Middle Eastern | 1 | 1.6 | MSI | 2 | 3 |
| Native American | 1 | 1.6 | Other | 4 | 6 |
| Southeast Asian | 7 | 11.3 | Unsure/Prefer Not to Say | 14 | 23 |
| Multiracial/ethnic | 14 | 22.6 | Athletic Division Played For | | |
| Gender | | | Division I | 26 | 42 |
| Man | 31 | 50.0 | Division II | 12 | 19 |
| Woman | 28 | 45.2 | Division III | 24 | 39 |
| Non-binary | 1 | 1.6 | | | |
| Trans-Woman | 1 | 1.6 | | | |
| Choose Not to Answer | 1 | 1.6 | | | |
| Athletic Scholarship | | | | | |
| Yes | 27 | 44 | | | |
| No | 35 | 56 | | | |

Note. *N* = 62.

Table 2*Sports Played*

| | <i>n</i> | % |
|------------------------------------|----------|------|
| Baseball | 2 | 2.2 |
| Basketball | 10 | 11.2 |
| Bowling | 1 | 1.1 |
| Cross Country | 6 | 6.7 |
| Cheerleading | 1 | 1.1 |
| Dance | 1 | 1.1 |
| Fencing | 2 | 2.2 |
| Football | 9 | 10.1 |
| Golf | 3 | 3.4 |
| Gymnastics | 2 | 2.2 |
| Ice Hockey | 1 | 1.1 |
| Lacrosse | 1 | 1.1 |
| Rifle | 2 | 2.2 |
| Rowing | 4 | 4.5 |
| Soccer | 7 | 7.9 |
| Softball | 3 | 3.4 |
| Swimming & Diving | 6 | 6.7 |
| Tennis | 5 | 5.6 |
| Track & Field (Indoor and Outdoor) | 18 | 20.2 |
| Volleyball | 2 | 2.2 |
| Water Polo | 3 | 3.4 |

Note. This table represents the sport(s) that participants indicated they played. There were 20 athletes who played more than one sport.

Table 3

Demographic Makeup of Athletic Divisions

| | <u>Division I</u> | | <u>Division II</u> | | <u>Division III</u> | |
|------------------------|-------------------|------|--------------------|------|---------------------|------|
| | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % |
| Race/Ethnicity | | | | | | |
| African American/Black | 15 | 57.7 | 5 | 41.7 | 4 | 16.7 |
| East Asian | 2 | 7.7 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 8.3 |
| Hispanic-American | 2 | 7.7 | 1 | 8.3 | 8 | 33.3 |
| Middle Eastern | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 4.2 |
| Native American | 0 | 0 | 1 | 8.3 | 0 | 0 |
| Southeast Asian | 2 | 7.7 | 2 | 16.7 | 3 | 12.5 |
| Multiracial/ethnic | 5 | 19.2 | 3 | 25.0 | 6 | 25.0 |

Note. *N* = 62. Division I group (*n* = 26), Division II group (*n* = 12), Division III group (*n* = 24).

Instrumentation

Independent Variables

Academic Racism. Hostile, aversive-hostile, and avoidant racism in academic settings were measured with a modified version of the Classes of Racism Scale (Carter et al., 2016) developed for this study. The subscales measuring hostile ($\alpha = .95$), aversive-hostile ($\alpha = .91$), and avoidant ($\alpha = .74$) racism have good internal reliability and have been found to have predictive validity for race-based traumatic stress symptoms (RBTSS; Carter et al., 2016). An example of an individual item measuring hostile racism is “*In academic settings, professors or classmates have reacted to me as if they were afraid or intimidated*” and an example of an individual item measuring aversive-hostile racism is “*In academic settings, I have been mistaken*

for someone else of my race (who may not look like you at all).” “In academic settings, I have been made fun of, picked on, pushed, shoved, hit, or threatened with harm” is an example of an individual item measuring for avoidant racism. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each of these items on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The Cronbach’s alpha for the academic racism scale in the current sample was .97.

Athletic Racism. Hostile, aversive-hostile, and avoidant racism in athletic settings were measured with a modified version of the Classes of Racism Scale (Carter et al., 2016) developed for this study. The subscales measuring hostile ($\alpha = .95$), aversive-hostile ($\alpha = .91$), and avoidant ($\alpha = .74$) racism have good internal reliability and have been found to have predictive validity for race-based traumatic stress symptoms (Carter et al., 2016). An example of an individual item measuring hostile racism is *“My coaches or teammates have reacted to me as if they were afraid or intimidated”* and an example of an individual item measuring aversive-hostile racism is *“I have been asked to change my appearance (e.g. dress, hair) by my coaches in order to stay at practice or at a college sports event.”* *“In athletic settings, I have been threatened with physical violence by an individual or group of individuals who were of a different race than myself”* is an example of an individual item measuring for avoidant racism. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each of these items on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The Cronbach’s alpha for the athletic racism scale in the current sample was .97.

Feelings of Institutional Exploitation. Student-athletes’ feelings of exploitation by their institution were measured with the Perceived Exploitation of College Athletes Questionnaire (PECA; $\alpha = .80$; Simons & Van Rhee, 2000). The PECA has been found to have predictive

validity for academic performance (Van Rheenen & Atwood, 2014). Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each of these items on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The three items are: (1) “Sometimes I feel that I am being taken advantage of as an athlete,” (2) “I give more to the university than it gives to me,” and (3) “This university makes too much money off its athletes, who see very little of it.” The Cronbach’s alpha for the PECA in the current sample was .80.

Dependent Variables

Academic Performance. Academic performance was measured by participants’ self-reported overall grade point averages (GPAs) on a 4.0 scale, as well as whether or not they have been placed under academic probation before. Current student-athletes were asked to indicate their academic year and their major while former student-athletes were asked what they majored in and if they graduated from their institution.

Mental Health.

Depression. Depressive symptoms were measured with the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 which consists of nine items (PHQ-9; $\alpha = .89$; Kroenke et al., 2001). A sample item is, “How often have you been bothered by feeling down, depressed, or hopeless over the past 2 weeks?” Participants were asked to indicate how often they have been bothered by the problems listed during the past two weeks by using a 4-item Likert scale, ranging from “not at all” to “nearly every day.” The PHQ-9 has been found to have good construct and criterion validity (Kroenke et al., 2001). The Cronbach’s alpha for the PHQ-9 in the current sample was .93.

Anxiety. Anxiety symptoms were measured with the Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale-7 which consists of seven items (GAD-7; $\alpha = .92$; Spitzer et al., 2006). A sample item is,

“Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge?” Like the PHQ-9, participants were asked to indicate how often they have been bothered by the problems listed during the past two weeks by using a 4-item Likert scale, ranging from “not at all” to “nearly every day.” The GAD-7 has been found to have good diagnostic validity and concurrent validity, such that higher scores are associated with poor mental health (Zhong et al., 2015). The Cronbach’s alpha for GAD-7 in the current sample was .92.

Feelings of Isolation. Feelings of isolation were measured with two versions of the Three-Item Loneliness Scale that were modified to assess for feelings of isolation on 1) campus and 2) within an athletic setting ($\alpha = .72$). The original scale has been found to have discriminant and convergent validity (Hughes et al., 2006). Examples of items include, “On campus, how often do you feel left out?” and “On your college sports team, how often do you feel isolated from others?” Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each of these six items on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (hardly ever) to 3 (often). The Cronbach’s alpha for the Three-Item Loneliness Scale in the current sample was .89.

Results

Correlations of Racism, Mental Health, and Academic Performance

Hypothesis I predicted that there would be a positive correlation between racism and the mental health of student-athletes of color, and a negative correlation between racism and academic performance. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were computed to assess these relationships in both academic settings and athletic settings separately (see Table 4).

The correlation between academic racism and anxiety was found to be statistically significant ($p < .01$), $r = .48$, $N = 62$, as well as the correlation between athletic racism and anxiety ($p < .01$), $r = .53$, $N = 62$). Additionally, the correlation between academic racism and

depression was found to be statistically significant ($p < .01$), $r = .45$, $N = 62$, as well as the correlation between athletic racism and depression ($p < .01$), $r = .50$, $N = 62$. When compared by race/ethnicity, it was found the strongest correlations between racism, anxiety, and depression existed in Hispanic participants (academic racism and anxiety ($p < .01$), $r = .85$, $n = 11$, academic racism and depression ($p < .05$), $r = .64$, $n = 11$, athletic racism and anxiety ($p < .01$), $r = .79$, $n = 11$, athletic racism and depression ($p < .05$), $r = .61$, $n = 11$). When compared by athletic division, there were only significant correlations found in Division I and III athletes (see Table 3).

Table 4

Athletic Divisions: Subgroup Correlations for Study Variables

| Variable | <i>n</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|--------------------|----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Division I | | | | | |
| 1. Anxiety | 26 | – | .91** | .50** | .48* |
| 2. Depression | 26 | .91** | – | .51** | .50** |
| 3. Academic Racism | 26 | .50** | .51** | – | .97** |
| 4. Athletic Racism | 26 | .48* | .50** | .97** | – |
| Division II | | | | | |
| 1. Anxiety | 12 | – | .92** | .12 | .30 |
| 2. Depression | 12 | .92** | – | .30 | .22 |
| 3. Academic Racism | 12 | .12 | .13 | – | .91** |
| 4. Athletic Racism | 12 | .30 | .22 | .91** | – |
| Division III | | | | | |
| 1. Anxiety | 24 | – | .78** | .57** | .62** |

| | | | | | |
|--------------------|----|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 2. Depression | 24 | .78** | – | .44* | .53** |
| 3. Academic Racism | 24 | .57** | .44* | – | .67** |
| 4. Athletic Racism | 24 | .62** | .53** | .67** | – |

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Overall, the correlation between academic racism and GPA was not found to be statistically significant ($p = .95$), $r = -.01$, $N = 62$, as well as the correlation between athletic racism and GPA ($p = .56$), $r = .08$, $N = 62$). However, when compared by race/ethnicity, statistically significant correlations were found in East Asian and Hispanic participants. For Hispanic participants, academic racism and GPA had a correlation of $r = -.70$ ($p < .05$, $n = 11$), and for East Asian participants, there was a correlation of $r = -.99$ ($p < .01$, $n = 4$). When comparing by athletic division, it was found that academic racism was significantly correlated with GPA in athletes attending Division III schools ($p < .05$), $r = -.41$, $n = 24$, but not Divisions I and II.

Correlations of Racism, Exploitation, and Isolation

Hypothesis II stated that there would be a positive correlation between racism and feelings of isolation and exploitation in student-athletes of color. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were computed to assess these relationships in both academic settings and athletic settings separately (see Table 4).

Feelings of Isolation and Racism

The correlation between academic racism and feelings of isolation was found to be statistically significant ($p < .01$), $r = .70$, $N = 62$, as well as the correlation between athletic racism and feelings of isolation ($p < .01$), $r = .78$, $N = 62$). When compared by race/ethnicity, only East Asian participants did not have a significant correlation between racism and feelings of

isolation, however East Asians made up a very small proportion of the sample. Multiracial/ethnic participants had the strongest correlation between athletic racism and feelings of isolation compared to the other groups ($p < .01$, $r = .97$, $n = 14$), while Southeast Asian participants had the strongest correlation between academic racism and isolation ($p < .01$, $r = .92$, $n = 7$). Athletes across all athletic divisions had significant correlations between racism and feelings of isolation, the strongest correlations existing for Division I athletes: academic racism and feelings of isolation ($p < .01$, $r = .80$, $n = 26$), and athletic racism and feelings of isolation ($p < .01$, $r = .81$, $N = 26$). Additionally, athletes attending PWIs had strong correlations between racism and feelings of isolation: academic racism and isolation ($p < .01$, $r = .77$, $n = 35$), and athletic racism and isolation ($p < .01$, $r = .84$, $n = 35$).

Feelings of Exploitation and Racism

The correlation between academic racism and feelings of exploitation was found to be statistically significant ($p < .01$, $r = .65$, $N = 62$), as well as the correlation between athletic racism and feelings of exploitation ($p < .01$, $r = .66$, $N = 62$). Multiracial/ethnic athletes had the strongest correlations between racism and feelings of exploitation: academic racism and exploitation ($p < .01$, $r = .70$, $n = 14$), and athletic racism and exploitation ($p < .01$, $r = .82$, $n = 14$). Significant correlations were found in Division I and Division III athletes; the strongest correlation between academic racism and exploitation was found in Division I athletes ($p < .01$, $r = .77$, $n = 26$) while the strongest correlation between athletic racism and exploitation was found in Division III athletes ($p < .01$, $r = .85$, $n = 24$).

Table 5

Correlations for Study Variables

| Variable | <i>n</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|-----------------------------|----------|----------|-----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|-------|-------|
| 1. Anxiety | 62 | 13.56 | 6.20 | – | .87** | .46** | .68** | -.10 | .48** | .53** |
| 2. Depression | 62 | 17.84 | 7.92 | .87** | – | .48** | .66** | -.23 | .45** | .50** |
| 3. Feelings of Exploitation | 62 | 8.65 | 4.03 | .46** | .48** | – | .59** | -.04 | .65** | .66** |
| 4. Feelings of Isolation | 62 | 8.98 | 3.46 | .68** | .66** | .59** | – | -.13 | .70** | .78** |
| 5. GPA | 62 | 7.42 | 1.08 | -.10 | -.23 | -.04 | -.13 | – | -.01 | .08 |
| 6. Academic Racism | 62 | 48.76 | 24.99 | .48** | .45** | .65** | .70** | -.01 | – | .88** |
| 7. Athletic Racism | 62 | 45.50 | 25.42 | .53** | .50** | .66** | .78** | .08 | .88** | – |

p* < .05. *p* < .01.

Regression Analyses

To test Hypothesis III, four simple linear regressions were run to test if racism significantly predicted depression and anxiety. The overall regression for academic racism and anxiety was statistically significant ($R^2 = .23$, $F(1, 60) = 18.18$, $p < .01$). Similarly, the fitted regression model for athletic racism and anxiety was statistically significant ($R^2 = .28$, $F(1, 60) = 23.00$, $p < .01$). For academic racism and depression, the overall regression was statistically significant ($R^2 = .20$, $F(1, 60) = 15.20$, $p < .01$), as well as the overall regression for athletic racism and depression ($R^2 = .25$, $F(1, 60) = 19.60$, $p < .01$). On the other hand, the overall regression for athletic racism and GPA was not statistically significant ($R^2 = .01$, $F(1, 60) = .34$, $p = .56$), as well as the fitted regression model for academic racism and GPA ($R^2 = .00$, $F(1, 60) = .01$, $p = .95$).

Discussion

The current study was interested in understanding how experiences of racism in both athletic settings and academic settings relate to the mental health, academic performance, feelings of isolation, and feelings of exploitation of student-athletes of color across all athletic divisions (NCAA Divisions I, II, & III). Previous research has primarily focused on the experiences of Black male athletes playing on high revenue-generating teams at Division I PWIs (Hawkins, 2010; Van Rheezen, 2011; Van Rheezen, 2013; Murty & Roebuck, 2015; Beamon, 2014; Fuller, 2017). This study is one of the first to explore the experiences of athletes from other diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds attending different divisions at schools with different racial demographics, while also clearly specifying the environments in which racism is perpetrated (e.g., racial slurs said by professors versus coaches, etc.). Results support the hypotheses while also indicating that the correlations between racism, mental health, and academic performance vary by race/ethnicity and athletic division.

Subgroup Analyses by Race/Ethnicity

Past research has indicated that Division I Black male athletes are the most at risk for experiencing the harmful effects of racism (Cooper & Cooper, 2015; Beamon, 2014; Melendez, 2008). While the current study does find that racism predicts anxiety and depression symptoms in Black athletes, results also indicate that athletes from other diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds are at risk. In fact, subgroup analyses revealed that Hispanic-Americans had the strongest correlations between racism, anxiety, and depression, while Southeast Asian and Multiracial/ethnic participants had the strongest correlations between racism and feelings of isolation. It is also necessary to highlight that this study differentiated between racism experienced in academic settings from athletic settings. While both types of racism were correlated with the outcome variables, athletic racism was more highly correlated with each

variable than academic racism was. There could be various explanations for this finding, one being that athletes typically spend a lot of time with their team. It is not uncommon for athletes to dine and dorm together, with some reporting spending up to 40 hours a week in athletic settings (Beamon, 2014). Athletes do not have the luxury of skipping practices or sports events without the threat of being removed from the team, potentially losing a scholarship. This could make it very difficult for student-athletes of color to separate themselves from racist athletic environments compared to racist academic environments, where they may have the option to switch from one class to another or even stop showing up to class. Of course, skipping class or practice is not a solution to racist environments and future research should aim to create safer environments for student-athletes of color as they earn their degrees.

While previous research has indicated that racism and GPA can be significantly correlated in student-athletes of color (Upthegrove et al., 1999), the current study found this was not the case for Black athletes. Instead, academic racism was only correlated with GPA for East Asian and Hispanic-American athletes. These findings could potentially be explained by the phenomenon identified as stereotype management. Stereotype management proposes that negative stereotypes against an individual (e.g., being seen as a “dumb jock” or being told you are not a “real student”) can act as a form of motivation rather than discouragement. For instance, Fuller (2017) came across a “tipping point” in which racial academic stereotypes and perceived discrimination went from negatively impacting Black male student-athletes’ GPAs to actually increasing their GPAs. Results also suggested it mattered in what setting the stereotypes and discrimination were experienced, as perceived discrimination in academic settings were correlated with lower GPAs while academic stereotypes heard in athletic settings were correlated with higher GPAs (Fuller, 2017). Though the current study did not find significant correlations

between either academic or athletic racism and GPA, it still suggests that the relationship between racism and academic performance is very complex for student-athletes of color: in particular for Black male athletes, who face the brunt of negative academic stereotypes (Beamon, 2014; Fuller 2017).

Subgroup Analyses by Athletic Division

Division I athletes typically take the spotlight when it comes to college athletics, as they account for 96% of the revenue the NCAA sees each year (NCAA, 2020) and are overrepresented in academic research. However, it is important to include the experiences of athletes from other athletic divisions as well, as graduation rates are lowest for Division III athletes (Hosick & Durham, 2017). The current study found that academic racism was negatively correlated with the GPAs of Division III athletes, but not for Division I or II athletes. This finding may be explained by the fact that Division III athletes do not receive sports scholarships. Due to this lack of financial aid, Division III athletes might be more likely to have jobs, which could significantly reduce the time they dedicate to studying and classwork. On the other hand, Division I and II athletes do usually receive sports scholarships which can be lost if grades drop too low. This could increase their incentive to do well in their classes. Additionally, Division I athletes have reported having less control over their academic life, such that their coaches pick out “sports friendly” classes for them to help keep their grades up (Murty & Roebuck, 2015). All of these occurrences could potentially explain why the effects of racism on GPA showcase in only Division III athletes.

Despite not finding a significant correlation between racism and GPA for athletes of color at Division I and II institutions, it is still possible that their academic performance is harmed by negative racial experiences; it just might not be apparent by looking at GPA. For instance,

Cooper and Cooper (2015) discussed how negative relationships with professors were detrimental to Black athletes' academic engagement. Low academic engagement could explain low graduation rates even if GPAs are average. Overall, results from the current study suggest that there are various factors that influence an athlete's experience during college, and that not just Black male athletes at Division I PWIs are at risk for feelings of exploitation and racism, even if other athletes of color have been left out of previous research.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are some important limitations to note when considering the results of this study. For instance, while one aim of this study was to understand the experiences of student-athletes from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, there was a lack of a representative sample. There were low numbers of participants that identified as Native American, Southeast Asian, East Asian, or Middle Eastern limited the ability to run regressions specific to racial/ethnic groups.

Additionally, about 23% of participants identified as multiracial or multiethnic. Because this study did not measure one's phenotype, there is a limitation in knowing how one's skin color and appearance could potentially moderate their experiences on campus. Previous research including skin color has shown that individuals who share the same racial and ethnic backgrounds can have entirely different experiences due to how light or dark their skin is (Klonoff & Landrine, 2000). Future research should take skin color into consideration to better understand discrimination.

This study was also interested in understanding how the racial makeup of an institution would affect an athlete's experience, whether it be predominantly White or Minority-serving. While the majority of participants indicated they attended a PWI (57%), there was a considerable amount that indicated they were unsure or unwilling to say what type of institution they attended

(23%). Having this information would be extremely beneficial, as there were not enough participants in the other categories to have subgroup analyses. Future research should aim to have more representative samples of individuals from MSIs so their experiences can be accurately compared to those at PWIs, and this lack of representation is a limitation of this study.

Another limitation of this study is that it is a cross sectional study where data was only collected from the participants at one time. A longitudinal study that follows student-athletes of color throughout their college experience and after could provide important data on long term outcomes and allow researchers to make causal statements about the relationship between experiences of racism and both academic performance and feelings of isolation and exploitation. It would be especially informative to explore former athletes' qualitative responses regarding their college experience, such as whether or not they believed it adequately prepared them for a life outside of sports and instead in their careers. Exploring the graduation rates, life satisfaction, careers, and long-term mental health of former college athletes of color would provide the field a better understanding of how the NCAA affects the athletes it profits from the most.

Conclusion

The current study found that racism in both academic and athletic settings are related to anxiety, depression, feelings of isolation, and feelings of exploitation in student-athletes of color, perhaps differentially by athletic division and race/ethnicity. Despite limitations, the findings suggest that more thorough investigations into how and to what extent racism impacts the mental health and academic performance of student-athletes of color are needed. This area of inquiry is particularly important because the NCAA is making a large profit off of students and should consider the ethics around gaining this profit and what benefit student-athletes get in return.

Therefore, future studies should work to understand these relationships better, in the hopes of creating a safer and more equitable academic environment for student-athletes of color.

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