Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics

Social Support and Minority Student-Athletes

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Interpersonal relationships in the family are important to individuals, especially college students. A subgroup within the larger population of college students that calls for further examination is ethnic minority college student-athletes. The present study involved examining ethnic minority college student-athletes' perceptions of social support they receive from their family as they attend a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). Findings indicated that student-athletes perceived various types of social support that they found beneficial to them both as student-athletes in general and as minority student-athletes in particular. Types of social support included emotional support, informational support, tangible assistance support, task appreciation support, and esteem support. Participants also offered advice to families for providing social support to student-athletes while in college. Practical applications of the findings, along with directions for future research are also discussed.

Introduction

Social support is the lifeblood that enables countless people to contend with life's difficulties. Some of the most prominent social support people receive is from family members (Bowen & Chapman, 1996; Miller, Shoemaker, Willyard, & Addison, 2008; Segrin, 2003), as it is family with whom we typically maintain the closest and most meaningful interpersonal relationship (Vangelisti, 2004). The purpose of the present study is to explore the influence of family social support on minority[1] college student-athletes who attend Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). There is good reason to investigate family social support pertaining to minority college student-athletes at PWIs. The first reason concerns the fundamental challenges that student-athletes, as a whole, experience which warrant them receiving social support. For example, these challenges include balancing academic and athletic responsibilities, struggling with learning disabilities, handling the close scrutiny of the media, and maintaining relationships with friends, family, and coaches (Chartrand & Lent, 1987; Clark & Parette, 2002; Wittmer, Bostic, Phillips, & Waters, 1981). Student-athletes also face challenges including preserving physical health and wellness, feeling intense pressure to succeed in their sport, and trying to determine how they will manage life after their college athletic career has come to an end (Parham, 1993). Taken together, as Ferrante and Etzel (1991) explained, "Today's student-athletes are presented with complex personal challenges in three major areas (i.e., personal, academic, and athletic), challenges that many often lack the ability to meet…" (p. 4). These are challenges that all student-athletes routinely contend with as they navigate both their academic and athletic experience at the university.

The second reason to investigate family social support pertaining to minority college student-athletes at PWIs is based on the *unique* challenges they face in what may be considered a peculiar culture (Lapchick, 1996a; Sellers & Damas, 1996). Put differently, there are challenges minority student-athletes encounter which are not commonly experienced by non minority student-athletes, and this as well warrants them receiving social support. These challenges have been well documented (Brooks & Althouse, 2000; Harris, Altekruse, & Engels, 2003). For instance, researchers have called attention to the racism and discrimination minority student-athletes encounter from people within and beyond the university community, such as being treated differently than their White counterparts, being dealt with rudely or unfairly, and being denied access to campus leadership positions (Singer, 2005; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993). Further, minority student-athletes have often been perceived as competent in their sport, yet intellectually inferior to White student-athletes (Sailes, 1993; Harrison & Lawrence, 2004). In fact, it has been noted that, generally, individuals tend to give greater attention to the athletic prowess rather than the academic ability of minority student-athletes (Lapchick, 1996b), and this happens quite often with particularly Black male student-athletes (Hodge, Burden, Robinson, & Bennett, 2008).

The challenges that minority student-athletes encounter at PWIs have also included prevailing racial stereotypes. For example, minority student-athletes have encountered professors who stereotype them as having been matriculated at the college/university based on affirmative action policies, or because general admission standards were lowered to help admit them (Scales, 1991). In other words, some professors have believed minority student-athletes to be incapable of gaining entry into their respective institution based solely on merit. Other scholars, such as Fries-Britt and Turner (2002), discovered that minority college students felt that they were stereotyped as the "token representative" in their class. For that reason, they felt enormous stress and pressure to prove that they belonged and could meet the demands of higher education (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Minority students also felt they were stereotyped by their White peers as being the one and only voice expected to represent all opinions of minority people (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). This belief has caused minority students to feel "uneasy, misunderstood, and without allies" (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002, p. 321) as they contributed to class discussions. Fries-Britt and Turner also ascertained that minority students at PWIs did not feel the campus made much effort to include activities and events which accommodated their needs. For that reason, minority students "expressed difficulty at dealing with a predominantly White environment" (p. 322) and reported "feeling alone and not part of the campus community" (p. 322). Other researchers have revealed that minority students have received both verbal and nonverbal insults/put-downs from professors and others in the campus community (Harper, 2009; Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000). It must be noted that in these researchers' (i.e., Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Harper, 2009; Solorzano & Ceja, 2000) discussion of experiences regarding minority college students, they were not specifically referring to student-athletes. Nevertheless, I argue that these findings translate to minority student-athletes' experience given that they are in the classroom having frequent interaction with professors and students.

The previously mentioned challenges faced by minority student-athletes may give them reason to isolate or detach themselves from the larger campus community (Kirk & Kirk, 1993), and also cause them to experience negative emotions such as bewilderment, resentment, and anger when they are persistently met with opposition (Clayton-Pedersen, Allen, & Milem, 1998; Smedley, Meyers, & Harrell, 1993). Being isolated or detached precludes these student-athletes from gaining access to vital campus resources or services for help (Broughton & Neyer, 2001).

Further, the challenges may cause these student-athletes to experience inauspicious psychological outcomes, such as depression, which may undermine both their self-efficacy and their motivation (Dealy, 1990). Because minority student-athletes at PWIs are encumbered by difficult and onerous experiences, it makes sense that researchers would want to examine social support and how this influences their experiences. As mentioned earlier, some of the most significant social support people receive is from their family, and in this study, I will explore student-athletes' perceptions of social support they receive from their family.

Deemed as a multi-dimensional construct (Rosenfeld, Richman, Bowen, & Wynns, 2006) social support is defined as that which improves the welfare of the person who receives it (Schumaker & Brownell, 1984), or that which "[helps] the recipient see realistic alternatives to a stressful situation, gain skills, and recognize that help and resources are available from others" (Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001, p. 279). Both of these definitions were well conceived and provide a firm basis given that the focus of the present study is on social support from family which may both help and enhance minority student-athletes in their time of need as they contend with unique challenges at a PWI. Their time of need may include instances of stress and uncertainty (Clayton-Pedersen, Allen, & Milem, 1998; Kirk & Kirk, 1993). The centerpiece of social support is that which influences the perspective and situation of the recipient thereby making better the recipient's situation. Clearly minority student-athletes are encumbered by difficult experiences. This makes it unmistakably evident that research ought to be designed to explore social support that may help this group of student-athletes deal with the difficulties of their journey. The present study takes a step in this direction. In what follows, I discuss research concerning the benefits of social support thus further laying the foundation for the present study.

The Beneficial Effects of Social Support

Not surprisingly, research concerning the beneficial effects of social support is extensive as scholars have well documented these benefits in different contexts (Balaswamy, Richardson, & Price, 2004; Chiriboga, 2001; Xu & Burleson, 2004) and within a variety of disciplines (Goldsmith, 1994; Riegal & Carlson, 2004; Rosenfeld, Richman, Bowen, & Wynns, 2006) over the decades. Scholars have noted a positive correlation between social support received by people and their mental and physical welfare (Burleson, Albrecht, & Sarason, 1994). This correlation is relevant to the present study concerning the beneficial effects of social support to student-athletes. For instance, scholars have argued that student-athletes seek social support when they are injured as this support helps them to mentally cope with their unfortunate situation (Hobfoll & Stevens, 1990). Building on this early work, scholars have examined the way athletes' perceived social support given to them from their coaches and teammates (Corbillon, Crossman, & Jamieson, 2008), and found that athletes felt that their teammates' support contributed to their well being as they recovered from an injury. Other researchers (e.g., Robbins & Rosenfeld, 2001) found that athletes appreciated and benefited from emotional support provided to them from their athletic trainers as they coped with an injury. Aside from social support as it relates to athletes during injury, Petrie and Stoever (1997) discovered that freshmen student-athletes earned higher grades when they received social support as this support helped them sustain their physical and mental well being. The aforementioned research concerning athletes, student-athletes, and social support is important as it provides evidence that social support has proven to be beneficial to this population of individuals. More specifically, social support has bolstered their mental and physical well being. It is important to call attention to this fact, pertaining to the present study in particular, given that the mental and physical well being of

minority student-athletes may be compromised while they attend a PWI. Their mental and physical welfare may be compromised given the many challenges they face as student-athletes in general, and given the unique challenges they encounter as minority student-athletes in particular. The present study extends the intellectual discussion on social support in the athletic context by examining it in the relationship between minority student-athletes and their family.

Researchers have shed light on the positive effects of social support as it relates to minority college students, and this body of research is also relevant to the present study. For instance, Castillo and Hill (2004) investigated social support and Mexican-American female college students and found that these students experienced less distress when they perceived they were getting adequate social support from their family. The students in this study believed that the social support enabled them to contend with challenges while striving to finish college. Moreover, researchers such as Constantino, Wilton, and Caldwell (2003) explored how social support played a key part in moderating the relationship between African American and Latino college students' psychological distress and their willingness to seek psychological assistance. It was discovered that when minority students were satisfied with their social support networks (i.e., family, friends, and faculty mentors) they were less likely to feel the need to seek psychological counseling. The implication of this study is that social support positively influenced these students in their time of need, thus benefiting them. Both of these studies (Castillo & Hill, 2004; Constantino et al., 2003) are significant as they offer proof of the benefits of social support networks to minority students, and how such networks enhance these students' quality of life.

There has been research conducted to specifically examine family support and interaction among minority college students at PWIs (Barnett, 2004). Barnett particularly examined African Americans, and in her study, she revealed that African American family support provided an emotional outlet while concomitantly enabling African American students to experience lesser amounts of distress at PWIs. Barnett reported that students received social support from their family in the form of care, love, empathy, and concern and this support positively affected their well being. Barnett further discovered that the involvement of the family helped these students to adapt to and survive in their environment. Students particularly received encouragement and emotional support from their family. The family represented a shelter in which these students sought refuge during stressful moments. Once again, it is clear that family serves an enormous function in the life of minority students as they attend college, and the social support provided by families has demonstrated to be significant and valuable. Although the study by Barnett did not pertain specifically to minority college student-athletes, a similar argument can be made for them as they experience stress and difficulty in college and therefore may receive and benefit from social support provided by their family.

In sum, each of the previously mentioned studies regarding the benefits of social support was well conceived and underscored the significance of social support to athletes, student-athletes, and minority college students. Although studies such as these were both pragmatic and useful, they did not focus exclusively on minority college student-athletes. For that reason, part of the current study attempts to fill this gap by exploring the construct of social support as it relates to this population of individuals. In particular, I am interested in the types of social support minority student-athletes identify as being communicated to them from their family. The first research question mirrors this precise focus:

RQ$_1$: What types of social support do minority student-athletes identify as communicated to them by their families?

Minority student-athletes are in a unique position to offer suggestions regarding social support communicated to them from their families given the student-athletes' first-hand experience. These findings could be used to educate families that have student-athletes who attend PWIs. These suggestions could also be used to educate families that someday might have a student-athlete who attends a PWI. In either case, the suggestions are worthwhile to share so that others are informed. Therefore, the second research question asks:

RQ$_2$: What type of advice would minority college student-athletes give to families about offering social support to current and future minority college student-athletes at PWIs?

Method

Participation Criteria

The participants in this study consisted of 11 (*n=11*) minority college student-athletes from a large PWI. Of the 11 who participated, five were male and six were female, and they ranged in age from 19 to 22 years old (*M=20.09*). Participants' ethnicities were African American and Hispanic. The student-athletes represented a range of sports including men's and women's basketball, men's and women's track & field, football, women's swimming, and softball. In order to comply with Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol, the participants were recruited through the academic center of the athletic department at the institution. A brief description of the study was provided for athletic/academic advisors to share with their student-athlete advisees to solicit participation. Athletic/academic advisors targeted student-athletes of color given that this was a significant requirement for participation in the study. Athletic/academic advisors were not forced to help the researcher solicit participants. In this way, some advisors agreed to help the researcher identify participants while others did not.

It is worth acknowledging that the present research study contains a small number of participants. In a study by Duncan and Brummett (1993), they addressed this matter by making it clear that the purpose of their study was neither to make broad generalizations nor to claim any type of correlations based on the data from their small sample size. They explained, "Further research is needed to determine the scope of application" (p. 62). The same is true regarding the present study. The goal of the present study was to simply examine types of social support minority student-athletes identity receiving from their family. No claim is being made that all minority student-athletes receive the types of social support found in the present study. Such a claim would be an oversimplification. More research is warranted before any statements can be made about the generalizability of the findings. This fact, however, does not undermine the significance of this research.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

I centered my study in the interpretive paradigm using qualitative methods (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). I employed in-depth, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews as my method of data collection with each participant (Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Smith, 1995). In-depth, semi-structured interviews are needed to probe the viewpoints of the participants and provide

qualitative data needed to identify and describe themes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Interviews averaged approximately 60 minutes in length. All of the interviews occurred in a private office space in the athletic department, and were digitally-audio recorded.

Once data was collected, it was then transcribed and analyzed by the researcher. The purpose of data analysis was to discover the meaning within data I gathered from participants (Smith, 1995). To fully unearth the complexity of the meaning, I utilized open coding and axial coding as my data analysis method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This method was most useful in helping me organize, synthesize, and make sense of raw textual data provided by my participants. The first step consisted of reading through all of the transcripts completely to gain a general sense of the voice of my participants and the uniqueness of their accounts and experiences. I then read through them a second time purposely searching for patterns or themes that emerged within the data. Emergent themes were noted and then were highlighted. Owen's (1984) tripartite thematic interpretation approach was used to determine what constituted a theme. Owen argued that themes embody three unique characteristics: (a) recurrence, (b) repetition, and (c) forcefulness. In the process of noting the themes, they were labeled using a key word, phrase, or abbreviation. I then focused on constantly comparing the general list of themes, linking those themes that were similar, thereby collapsing them. Following this, I attached excerpts from the transcripts to illustrate each theme.

After my analysis of the data, I verified the results using member checking as my verification strategy (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). A form of researcher triangulation, member checking is the process by which researchers share the results with the participants from whom they collected the data to, "verify the viability of [the] interpretations" (Harter et. al., 2008, p. 431). This method of researcher triangulation is important as participants have the opportunity to challenge what they recognize as incorrect interpretations by the researcher. I completed member checks with 7 out of my 11 participants and they did not perceive any errors which warranted challenging the interpretations. In other words, they perceived my interpretations as an accurate account of what they said during the interview. In what follows I present the results of my study.

Results

The goal of the study was to explore the types of social support that minority student-athletes perceived were given to them from their family while attending a PWI. Student-athletes identified and described different types of social support given to them. Some of their responses regarding support they receive both clearly and unequivocally reflected the unique challenges that they experience as minority student-athletes at a PWI. On the other hand, some of their responses mirrored the challenges and experiences of student-athletes more broadly.

The responses of social support mainly fit into five separate categories: (a) emotional support, (b) informational support, (c) tangible assistance, (d) task appreciation support, and (e) esteem support. To begin, I discuss the first category: emotional support.

Emotional Support

It was apparent that student-athletes benefited from emotional support *(n=11)* offered to them by their families. Student-athletes described that this support mainly benefited them during times of adjustment and moments of athletic defeat. For example, a football student-athlete described how emotional support from his family helped him during his first week of school as

he was trying to become adjusted to being a new student-athlete at the university. Making the adjustment was an enormous obstacle for him as he intermittently experienced bouts of nostalgia. He explained:

> I would say my first week here was in the summer like August I think it was. I had been here for a week and everything just wasn't going well you know, I was away from home, missing home, and football got tough and I was injured. You know it just seemed like a whole bunch of things not working out at one time and it got rough. You know and I didn't have anybody to go home to, I was going home to four white walls, an empty closet and a microwave and a refrigerator. It was tough, but just [my family] talking to me and encouraging me by letting me know that everything was okay. [It was] them reassuring the positive in the situation, where I was only seeing the negative. So that time right there was a time when that encouragement kind of helped me. (P3:27) [2]

As this excerpt demonstrates, emotional support helped this student-athlete survive the early stages of making the difficult adjustment. The family provided this emotional support as they empathized with him and provided encouragement as he went through this tough time. The emotional support from his family made a difference in helping him notice the positive in the situation.

Not only did emotional support provided by family help student-athletes manage difficult adjustment issues, but it also helped them cope during moments of defeat in their sport. Student-athletes experience both the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. The latter can be remarkably hard to accept. A track and field student-athlete described the emotional support communicated to him from his family after he lost a crucial race. The loss was compounded given that the student-athlete expected to perform better than he did. He explained:

> There was a time when I was running track and I was probably one of the better hurdlers in [my conference]. I had a race and I should have done a lot better than I did. And my parents they knew I was down because when I came across the finish line the first thing that I did was take a seat down in the corner. And the first thing that they did was come down from the stands and they waited for me when I put my clothes back on 'cause they knew I was sad. And my dad came over and he grabbed me and said, "You know there is nothing that you need to feel bad about. I'm very proud of you of what you've done and how far you've come." That helped when I think about it. (P9:72)

In this example, while losing the race devastated the student-athlete, his father played a crucial role in helping to buffer some of the anguish caused by defeat. He did this by offering emotional support that lifted the student-athlete's spirits. His father empathized with him and provided much needed encouragement. The emotional support clearly benefited the student-athlete as it made him feel better in the midst of an unfortunate outcome. Next I turn to the second type of social support described by student-athletes: informational support.

Informational Support

Information *(n=8)* was mentioned as a type of social support communicated by families to student-athletes. The information and suggestions that families provided helped student-

athletes during moments of uncertainty. Informational support came in the form of suggestions for how to behave differently in order to fit in on a predominantly White campus, and advice regarding how to handle life's basic responsibilities. For example, regarding suggestions for how to operate on a predominantly White campus, a track and field student-athlete shared an account of when her mother told her that she has to learn to fit in or blend into her new surroundings. Fitting in sometimes meant changing the way she spoke, depending on with whom she was speaking at the time. In this way, her language would be modified to fit her environment. She explained:

> I remember being frustrated when I first got here because I never felt like white people, especially my teammates, understood me. It was strange. [My teammates] spoke their own way, wanted to party a different way and stuff like that. Me, I was somebody different 'cause I didn't grow up where they did. So my mother talked to me about how to fit in with the way I spoke, wore my hair and things like that. She basically said that I couldn't act the same with them as I did with my black friends. It really worked! I felt more comfortable when I did this cause it was like they included me more. (P10: 82)

This excerpt captures one of the unique identity challenges that minority student-athletes contend with at a PWI. As is evident, this student-athlete benefited from the ideas that her mother gave her about how to act in her new surroundings. The informational support made a big difference as it helped the student-athlete learn how to accommodate to her new environment.

Informational support not only regarded how to behave on a predominantly White campus but, as aforementioned, it also concerned how to handle life's basic responsibilities. For example, a basketball player shared an instance when his mother gave him suggestions about how to administer his personal financial matters. This was helpful because he was inexperienced at living on his own in college and having to manage the financial aspect of his life. He explained:

> When I first got here I didn't know how to budget my money that well. When I first came here I had never had a place by myself. I had never had a serious bank account or stuff like that. So my mom helped me set up a serious bank account and stuff like that. She helped me plan out how to pay my bills every month. She helped me calculate everything that I needed to calculate. So basically she helped me set up a whole lot of structure for my life while I was down here. (P7:57)

In this example, the student-athlete gained from the advice that his mother provided for him. The structure that his mother helped him establish during his college years is one that he will likely utilize and build on for the rest of his life. The financial structure provided was significant as it would likely enable him to avert making a disastrous financial mistake. I now discuss another type of social support provided for student-athletes: tangible assistance.

Tangible Assistance

Interestingly, while many college student-athletes are rewarded with full athletic scholarships that covers the cost of tuition, room and board (as determined by the institution's "official allowance," and textbooks (NCAA, 2009, bylaw 15.2), the present study revealed that

this reward does not preclude them from receiving tangible support from their family *(n=10)*. Full athletic scholarships, which are granted for a one-year term and must be renewed annually at the discretion of the athletic department, have been shown to inadequately provide student-athletes with the resources necessary for all living expenses (Sander, 2010). Perhaps the narrowly defined scope of the scholarship helps to explain part of the reason why student-athletes receive tangible support from their family. In the present study, tangible assistance was mainly described as money. Tangible assistance was provided during times when student-athletes needed money after experiencing an unfortunate turn of events. For instance, a basketball player shared a story about when he and one of his roommates had no place to live. At that point, his mother intervened by helping. He recounted:

> It was me and two roommates. One of them was on the basketball team. And we left so we was gone for four weeks. Our roommate while we was gone got kicked out [of our apartment] but we didn't know 'cause he couldn't get in touch with us 'cause we was in Australia. So when we came back home we ain't have no where to stay, we had to move out immediately. So we moved out and I called my mom and she caught a plane and came down and everything. She paid for us you know a down payment on an apartment and then moved us all in there and stuff like that. That helped out a lot. (P7:59)

As this excerpt demonstrates, the support provided by this student-athlete's mother enabled both he and his roommates to make it through an adverse situation. Not only did his mother provide tangible assistance in the form of money, but she also provided tangible assistance in the form of actively participating to help move her son and his roommates into their new apartment.

Other participants also highlighted tangible assistance in the form of money given to them from family. For example, a softball player stated, "No matter what, I can call my mom or dad anytime and be like dad, mom, I need money and they will be like 'okay'" (P2: 16). Next I reveal another type of social support communicated to student-athletes: task appreciation.

Task Appreciation Support

Another form of social support mentioned by student-athletes was task appreciation support *(n=6)*. Task appreciation support involved families being present in the stands (i.e., attending games) to cheer on student-athletes as they competed in their sport. In this way, task appreciation support was demonstrated when families acknowledged the effort that student-athletes were putting into their sport by conveying their appreciation of this effort. For example, a student-athlete articulated the task appreciation support offered by his mother as she attended his games. He explained:

> Absolutely, [my mom] supports me in athletics. And she wants to be there to cheer me on. Her presence means the world to me. It makes me feel good. She'll cheer me up if we lost after a game and let me know that it's not the end of the world. You know she's involved in just about everything. (P4:36)

This excerpt captures the importance of family making an attempt to attend athletic competitions. Family presence means a lot to student-athletes because it communicates the message to them that their family cares about what they do and shows concern for what they do. Student-athletes

invest a lot of time and effort in their craft. This time and effort comes in the form of countless hours of practice and film sessions to study and prepare for the opposition, in addition to grueling training regimens. It helps when family recognizes this endeavor as it makes student-athletes feel that it is not in vain. I now turn to the final type of social support provided by families: esteem support.

Esteem Support

Esteem support *(n=8)* involved family reminding student-athletes that they can handle academic challenges despite the prevailing rhetoric that suggests they are incapable of doing so. Esteem support made student-athletes feel better about themselves by sending the message that they were smart and capable of fulfilling academic tasks. For example, a student-athlete shared a time when her father boosted her self-esteem as she experienced people on campus doubting her intellectual capabilities. She explained:

> Some of my teachers just don't think I belong here. They think I'm all about sports. I had a teacher who said that most of the athletes he had weren't smart and didn't care about school and he figured I was the same. This got at me but my dad told me to stay with it 'cause he knew I could do anything I put my mind to and he told me I was smart. He got into my head. That message got me out of the slump I was in. (P11:85)

In this example, the parent provided a counter perspective that reaffirmed the positive intellectual qualities of the student-athlete. That perspective enabled her to withstand the negative messages communicated by a faculty member. Similarly, a track and field student-athlete explained how his family's social support played a crucial role in getting him to believe that he was intellectually capable and not solely athletically gifted. He recalled:

> I know like there are people around [this university] who all they think is that all black athletes can do is run fast, jump high, and have a strong bodies. They don't think we can do much else so they are more interested in us for how we play our sport and not what we're doing in school. This is the message I kind of feel here at [this university] and I don't like it. And I don't like how the White athletes are assumed to be smarter and not just athletes. It sometimes makes me question myself as student. Sometimes I talk to my family about this and they always remind me that I am smart and not just piece of meat as an athlete and that in a way makes me feel better about me. (P1: 6)

 When others would make an attempt to undermine student-athletes' self-esteem, student-athletes could simply reflect on esteem support messages from their family. Esteem support messages were, in essence, survival messages helping student-athletes to be strong and confident in the midst of a firestorm of criticism and messages that lowered their self-esteem.

Taken together, in answer to this first research question, my participants were forthcoming with many different examples of their experiences that I organized into emotional support, informational support, tangible assistance, task appreciation support, and esteem support. Admittedly, some of the responses concerning support received reflected the experiences of student-athletes more broadly (e.g., coping with athletic defeat, family attending athletic competitions). I also acknowledge that some of the responses concerning support

received relate to the experiences of college students as a whole (e.g., experiencing homesickness, receiving financial assistance). In contrast, though, other responses regarding support received were indicative of the unique experiences of minority student-athletes (e.g., trying to fit in at a PWI, dealing with prevailing stereotypes). All of these findings contribute to the present study and I will further explain this in the discussion section. I now discuss the advice that student-athletes gave for offering social support.

Advice to Families

The second research question asked, "What type of advice would minority college student-athletes give to families about offering social support to current and future minority college student-athletes at PWIs?" In contrast to the first research question, the responses to this research question did not at all pertain to the unique challenges and experiences of minority student-athletes at a PWI. In other words, the advice seemed more relevant to general issues of student-athletes as a whole. I further expound upon this particular finding in the discussion section as well, as it is an important one to underscore.

Advice mainly fit into three separate categories: (a) maintain a presence, (b) change the topic, and (c) "keep it real." To begin, I discuss the first category: maintain a presence.

Maintain a Presence

Student-athletes gave the advice that family members should attend their sporting events as much as possible *(n=10)*. The physical presence of family in the stands to support student-athletes is something meaningful when student-athletes are competing. For example, a student-athlete offered the advice that families should try to support student-athletes by maintaining a physical presence at games. He explained:

> It feels really good for a student-athlete to know that he put in all that work and it feels really good that he can look up into the stands and see his parents there you know. You know they sacrifice that trip to get there. (P5:47)

Family being in the stands is something special to student-athletes. It provides families with the opportunity to cheer on the student-athletes and it gives student-athletes something to be proud of knowing that family made the effort to attend. Some families may not be able to attend events either because they can not afford to or because they live far away. Nevertheless, student-athletes made it clear that every effort should be made to attend, if possible.

Student-athletes also gave advice that families should make an attempt to maintain a presence even when a physical presence is not possible. The participants affirmed that maintaining a nonphysical presence can be achieved by family members sending emails, leaving messages on voicemail, and sending cards and letters. Student-athletes also believed that their family could maintain a nonphysical presence by keeping the student-athletes at the forefront of their (i.e., family's) thoughts. Being at the forefront of their thoughts means that family is with the student-athlete without actually physically being there. This affirmed for these student-athletes that support is *always* there. To this end, a student-athlete offered the advice to families to maintain a nonphysical presence as he explained:

> It's always good to let [student-athletes] know that they'll always have the support. You know their family is with them. Even though they [i.e., family] are home, they still love them. Just let them know the same feelings that they get when they are at home, there is no change in that. Yeah, they have to understand that regardless of where you are, we're still part of your life. (P4:38)

Knowing that family maintains a consistent presence enables student-athletes to feel that they are never alone to contend with challenges that may arise. I now discuss another element of advice offered to families: change the topic.

Change the Topic

Student-athletes gave the advice that families should be prepared to "change the topic" *(n=5)*. Though only a small number of student-athletes mentioned this, I argue that it is important to note because of the strong emphasis that this group of student-athletes placed upon it. Student-athletes conveyed that people in their life, particularly at school, often want to discuss sports with them. Sports topics include, but are not limited to, how their team is performing, who the next opponent is, what their chances are of winning the next match/game, and how they are feeling physically. Participants viewed this incessant dialogue about their sport as cumbersome. For example, a student-athlete explained:

> I think that when you're doing football all the time sometimes you need someone to talk to that doesn't talk about football. It's like an escape. [Me and my teammates] be sittin' around the table eating dinner and a lot of guys say, "Man I'm tired of people talking about football!" You know we are over here so many hours a day and when I get to my room the first thing somebody want to talk about is football. It feels good sometimes the parent can talk about some extracurricular activities that don't involve football. Maybe social life or how is the food or something. (P5: 47)

As this excerpt demonstrates, although a major part of the student-athlete's identity is the "athlete" portion, he appreciates it when people in his life, most notably family, make an attempt to engage him in dialogue regarding a different topic. Changing the topic communicates the message that family has a concern for other aspects of the student-athlete's life. Next I turn to the final element of advice offered by student-athletes: "keep it real."

Keep it Real

Another part of advice to families was to "keep it real" with the student-athletes *(n=4)*. The participants defined "keeping it real" to mean telling student-athletes what they need to hear rather than what people think that they want to hear. People sometimes maintain a strong positive bias toward student-athletes, and tend to lavish praise on student-athletes for how well they are performing athletically, while at the same time failing to constructively criticize how student-athletes can improve in other areas of their life. For example, a basketball player explained:

> When it comes to family I think that they should say things that's real. You know being a student-athlete everybody got something positive to say. Everybody want to say, "You

know you doing so good" this and that. But the reality is that you always need that one or two persons to tell you, "You're messing up" or "Look you need to do this or you're not doing that." I think that's the parents' role. My momma you know no matter how good basketball was going or how good school was going she would always say, "You know you could do better. You know you could do this. You're really not doing that good." She would always keep me level headed. (P7:59)

As this excerpt illustrates, when family members "keep it real," this provides the integral perspective that student-athletes need to hear in order to keep their feet firmly planted on the ground. This message is supportive and student-athletes believe that this support is necessary as it keeps their ego from expanding.

Taken together, in answer to the second research question, my participants were forthcoming with different types of advice for families. As previously mentioned, however, the advice did not necessarily pertain to how families can offer support for some of the challenges that minority student-athletes experience as they attend a PWI. Instead, the advice seemed to pertain more to supporting student-athletes generally. I now offer a discussion of the findings, along with limitations and directions for future research.

Discussion

This study centered on the types of social support communicated to minority college student-athletes from their family at a PWI. In answer to the first research question, I discovered that student-athletes described receiving many different types of social support from their family including emotional support, informational support, tangible assistance, task appreciation support, and esteem support. Emotional support included helping with the college transition, and coping with the agony of athletic defeat. Informational support included advice regarding how to fit in on a predominantly white campus and how to manage some of life's basic responsibilities. Tangible assistance primarily came in the form of money or other concrete goods that assisted student-athletes both in the midst of an unfortunate financial situation and to help procure basic necessities. Task appreciation support included when family attended athletic competitions to cheer on student-athletes thereby recognizing their effort. Esteem support involved family reiterating the academic capability of the student-athlete when others tried to dismantle it, and when family discredited prevailing racial stereotypes of the student-athletes. These messages from family boosted the way student-athletes felt about themselves.

After observing these findings, one can see that the types of social support identified by student-athletes relate both to the challenges they experience as student-athletes in general, and also to some of the unique challenges they contend with as minority student-athletes specifically. I argue that this apparent contrast is an important one to underscore in this particular study. This contrast supports existing literature stating that the student-athlete population, in general, experiences a specific set of challenges including, but not limited to, handling academic/athletic responsibilities and dealing with the close scrutiny of the media (Chartrand & Lent, 1987; Clark & Parette, 2002; Wittmer, Bostic, Phillips, & Waters, 1981). Minority student-athletes are not exempt from dealing with these challenges. At the same time, it supports literature stating that minority student-athletes contend with additional challenges which are specific to their minority status (Brooks & Althouse, 2000; Harris, Altekruse, & Engels, 2003; Hodge, Burden, Robinson, & Bennett, 2008; Lapchick, 1996b; Scales, 1991). Taken together, scholars can call attention to

both the similarities and the differences of minority student-athletes' experiences and how familial social support assists while they contend with these obstacles. The familial social support they receive fundamentally helps them deal with challenges on *both* sides. Support for challenges on one side (e.g., experiencing the agony of defeat) neither minimizes nor negates support received while wrestling with obstacles on the other (e.g., racial stereotypes). Similarly, support received for one side is not any more important than support received for the other side. For that reason, we should not marginalize one side and instead favor the other. The present study calls attention to this fact.

In answer to the second research question, I discovered that student-athletes offered thoughtful, considerate, practical advice concerning how family should provide social support to student-athletes at a PWI. Advice student-athletes offered to family included maintaining a presence, being willing to speak about topics beyond sports, and offering needed constructive criticism. I acknowledge that this advice did not include specific ways family could help with the unique challenges that minority student-athletes contend with at a PWI. However, the advice offered is worthwhile and should be considered because it relates to the experiences that minority student-athletes have as student-athletes in general.

As previously established, though minority student-athletes do have experiences which are specific to them because of their racial minority status, they also encounter experiences that affect student-athletes more broadly. Therefore, the advice offered for social support here is useful and practical because it will directly help these minority student-athletes as they contend with some of these issues. For example, the advice that family 'maintain a presence' is solid advice as it sends the message to the student-athlete that family is always available, particularly during moments of distress, to play a supportive role in the student-athlete's life. These moments of distress may include something of the general student-athlete variety (e.g., having a tough time with a coach) or, on the other hand, may include an experience unique to minority student-athletes (e.g., feeling marginalized in a PWI culture). Further, the advice that family 'change the topic' sends the message to student-athletes that family is concerned with meaningful aspects going on in their life that transcend the sports context. This is sound advice as it communicates to student-athletes that their family has a *bona fide* interest in other aspects of their identity. Family may change the topic to discuss something related to the student-athlete experience generally (e.g., finding it difficult to have enough time to devote to academic tasks), or to change the topic and discuss something directly related to the unique experience of minority student-athletes (e.g., dealing with racism). In sum, the advice in the present study focuses on the student-athlete experiences more broadly, yet in some ways pertains to race indirectly.

The findings of this study expand the current base of literature which serves as evidence that student-athletes in particular receive social support from different people, and this support helps them when they encounter various challenges (Hobfoll & Stevens, 1990; Petrie & Stoever, 1997). This particular finding is consistent with existing research that stresses the benefits of social support in interpersonal relationships (Allen, Ciambrone, & Welch, 2000; Castillo & Hill, 2004; Constantino, Wilton, & Caldwell, 2003). More specifically, the results of the present study advance the primary implication that social support is important in the life of people, and minority college student-athletes at PWIs are no exception. In the present study, student-athletes acknowledged that the social support provided to them from their family was beneficial as it was offered during a time of need. The social support enabled them to withstand a difficult time during their collegiate experience, and therefore, the support made a significant difference in their life. This fact, perhaps more than anything else, indicates the salience of social support in

the life of people. Social support gives people the strength to sustain their effort during turbulent moments in life.

The findings of this study also support an area of existing research that documents that people modify their way of communicating to fit into a different context. This finding is consistent with the main tenets and suppositions of Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles, 2008). In the present study, student-athletes stated that they received informational support in the form of advice from their family regarding how to behave in a way that would help them fit in on a predominantly white campus. According to CAT, people converge their behavior to minimize the difference between their style of communication and others' style of communication while operating in the new environment. This convergence enables student-athletes to bring their speech pattern closer to the speech pattern of others with whom they are communicating, thereby making them appear normal and even likable (Giles, 2008). A tremendous challenge for minority student-athletes is fitting in with teammates who do not share the same identity and background. This finding does not suggest that student-athletes permanently changed their modes of communication. Instead, this finding makes it evident that student-athletes learned to be flexible communicators. Being flexible meant knowing how to code switch (e.g., change one's pattern of verbal and nonverbal communication) in various contexts. Student-athletes indicated benefitting from the informational support that called attention to the importance of this.

This study has practical significance and therefore can be applied to those families who currently have minority student-athletes in college or that one day may have them. I endorse translating research into practice as Petronio (2007) argued:

> We recognize that in order to address everyday problems we need to go beyond the knowledge discovery of the basic research enterprise to interpret and apply research outcomes in an effort to develop effective practices for the betterment of everyday life. (p. 215)

This excerpt captures the significance of applied research and I plan to apply the present research study. For instance, given that student-athletes were found to benefit from the social support provided by families, this must be brought to the attention of families so that they are aware of the importance. This will be brought to their attention by making formal presentations to families during pre-college, on-campus visits and also during first year college orientation. During both visits and orientation, families will receive valuable information regarding which types of social support may be offered to student-athletes and how helpful this support is to the student-athletes. As the information is shared with families, I will be sure to indicate that some of the support pertains specifically to the unique challenges that minority student-athletes face, while some of the support concerns issues that are commonly experienced by student-athletes as a whole. This contrast is a significant point to note. The advice that student-athletes provided for family in the present study would likely be included as information to share during the seminars. Bringing this information the attention of these families may translate into a more improved experience for student-athletes as the support received may mitigate some of the trauma caused by their difficult experiences. A study such as this would be especially useful to athletic/academic advisors during orientation week as they meet with their first year minority student-athletes. This study would help facilitate a spirited and robust discussion about challenges they are likely to face as student-athletes in general, and those challenges that will be unique to them as minority student-athletes. Also, these meetings should not discontinue once orientation week has concluded. Instead,

meetings should be held intermittently during the academic year in order to carry on discussing these issues and finding out exactly what the student-athletes are experiencing.

This study is not without its limitations. The primary limitation is that one university was included in the study. A richer database could be built with the viewpoints of other minority student-athletes from other universities. Student-athletes from other universities might provide some further insight into types of social support offered to them; types which were not found in this study. Additionally, it is interesting to note that while prompted for specific advice they would give to parents of racial minority student-athletes about how to best support their child attending a PWI, none of the participants gave advice that they indicated was unique to minority student-athletes. Thus, future research will need to be conducted to specifically address this research question, and the interview protocol will need to be revised to gain a response that specifically addresses the issue.

The findings of this study pave the way for future research. First, now that we are informed of the social support communicated to student-athletes, the next step is to empirically quantify the influence of this support. It is possible that some types of support have more significant impact as opposed to others and discovering this would enable families to know exactly which types of social support are most meaningful. Second, it would be worthwhile to delve deeper into precisely how student-athletes of color may modify their behavior to fit in at PWI. Future researchers should explore the specifics of minority student-athletes' verbal and nonverbal communication that enables them to accomplish this.

Notes

[1]   Minority denotes student-athletes who are of ethnic minority descent thereby being non-Caucasian.

[2]   Following each of the excerpts from the interviews, I include participant number and page number(s) of the interview transcript.

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