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### **[Self]perceptions of Whiteness: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of White College Athletes**

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*The primary purpose of this exploratory study was to move toward a nuanced understanding of how whiteness serves to uphold structural racism within intercollegiate athletics, particularly through its influence on the experiences of White college athletes. More narrowly, as it relates to White college athletes, how do they make sense of their racial identity and understand their racialized experiences within the college sporting context? Through a methodological lens informed by interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), semi-structured interviews revealed three common phenomena. First, participants perceived whiteness as representing no definitive cultural or racial identity, allowing them to moderate its sociopolitical implications. Second, in developing and maintaining relationships with non-Whites, participants reported challenges in connecting across race, some of which manifested as unintended racist pitfalls. Lastly, participants found it difficult to conceive of an association between race and structural inequalities in college sport. Moving forward, implications derived from this study's findings include: issues concerning personal accountability and the moderation of both personal and structural effects of whiteness within sporting spaces; how White college athletes compartmentalize their own racial identity while actively engaging with the racialized identities of teammates; and how White college athletes navigate the resultant internalized tension(s) from said interactions.*

*Keywords: whiteness, student athlete, college sport, race, white racial identity*

**R**esulting from their critical review on the relationship(s) between race, whiteness, and sport, Fletcher and Hylton (2016) noted that the complex dynamics of whiteness within sport have garnered a level of intentioned focus and growth within sport sociology and sport-related fields over the past two decades. However, despite these and more recent reorientative incursions on the matter (e.g., Butryn, 2016; Leonard, 2017; Spracklen, 2013; Watson & Scraton, 2017), the reality is that “existing studies on whiteness in sport have largely focused on notions of White privilege, stereotyping, and subjectification of African American athletes as well as ‘racialized’ media portrayals that reinforce problematic ideologies” (Lawrence, Harrison, & Bukstein, 2016, p. 335). Although the aforementioned research foci is important to the broader discussion on race, whiteness, and sport, it simultaneously highlights the need to place more attention on the processes by which Whites either experience or define their identity within a given (racialized) sporting space. Thus, as applied within the sporting realm, the purview of this line of inquiry should be theoretically threefold, which is to examine how White individuals: (a) may perceive themselves as white; (b) may perceive their whiteness as affording them certain advantages or privileges; and (c) what they perceive to be the present state of racism in the United States (Hardiman & Keehn, 2012).

Nevertheless, Fletcher and Hylton (2016) argued that in spite of common and routine approaches taken to examine the construct of whiteness, attempts have been made to shift thinking toward a more post-structural rendering of the racialized experiences of White individuals. For instance, efforts to either develop or introduce new theorizations on whiteness within the sporting context include challenging hegemonic whiteness and the processes by which it can be internalized (Arai & Kivel, 2009), as well as the inextricable linkages between whiteness, power, and privilege in diverse sporting spaces (e.g., Fusco, 2005; Hartmann, 2007; Hylton & Lawrence, 2015). However, as indicated by Lawrence et al. (2016), one space in which little attention has been given is intercollegiate athletics. While comparative analyses of identity sources, particularly among Black and White college athletes (Brown, Jackson, Brown, Sellers, Keiper, & Manuel, 2003; Burden, Hodge, & Harrison, 2004; Henry & Closson 2012; Jackson, Keiper, Brown, Brown, & Manuel, 2002), and White college athletes’ perceptions of their Black counterparts (Brown, Brown, Jackson, Sellers, & Manuel, 2003; Harrison, Azzarito, & Burden, 2004; Harrison, Lawrence, & Bukstein, 2011; Zestcott & Brown, 2015) provide insightful appraisals on the intersection of whiteness and college sport, further research is needed to understand how White college athletes make sense of their racial identity and understand their racialized experiences. Therefore, the aim of this exploratory study, through a curation of the narratives of White college athletes, is to understand how White college athletes confront their whiteness and perceive the relative significance of being White within the college sporting context.

### **Intercollegiate Sport as a White Space**

Conceptualized within the realm of urban ethnography, the “White space” is a perceptual category that “reinforces a normative sensibility in settings in which black people are typically absent, not expected, or marginalized when present” (Anderson, 2015, p. 10). Similarly, Lipsitz’s (2011) conceptualized the analytical framework known as the “White spatial imaginary,” which operationalizes the spatialization patterns that racially structure spaces, the

nature of which is to maintain the institutional power of Whites and subsequently minimize the racial realities of racially marginalized communities. As a result of the racialized assumptions and imperatives that undergird these normative, “neutral” spaces of whiteness, the White spatial imaginary has socio-cultural consequences:

It structures feelings as well as social institutions. The White spatial imaginary idealizes “pure” and homogeneous spaces, controlled environments, and predictable patterns of design and behavior. It seeks to hide social problems rather than solve them. The White spatial imaginary promotes the quest for individual escape rather than encouraging democratic deliberations about the social problems and contradictory social relations that affect us all (Lipsitz, 2011, p. 29).

Moreover, Rios (2017) argued that the White space is much more than a physical state of being, but one where our attitudes and cultural frames aid in the normalization and reproduction of whiteness. It is in a similar vein that this duality of being is accounted for in what Feagin (2013) deemed as the “White racial frame,” whereby the institutionalization of whiteness works to normalize certain assumptions, values, and worldviews that are rooted in the histories and interests of White individuals. Thus, not only is whiteness made manifest and reproduced, but those falling outside the purview of whiteness (and their respective histories and interests) are subsequently marginalized and devalued. Carrington (2010) takes this contention a step further through his notion of the “White colonial frame,” an ideological framework that explains how discourse is produced to enable and rationalize racism “while denying the historical forms of White supremacy that continue to structure contemporary social institutions” (p. 4), such as that of sport. This framing allows for racial discourse to be malleable so as to uphold the dominance of Whites (both practical and theoretical in nature), all the while veiling this process through notions of colorblindness and covert forms of racism (Carrington, 2010).

When applied to intercollegiate athletics, the dominant social group status of Whites is further replicated. For instance, in the 2017-2018 academic year, Blacks held a greater proportion of college athlete representation among the revenue-generating sports of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I football (44.8%) and men’s basketball (53.6%), however, this is not the case when extrapolated across all of Division I athletics. For the 2017-2018 academic year, White males represented 56.8% of all male college athletes in Division I athletics, while Black males represented only 22.6%. Moreover, this phenomenon is not relegated solely to the field of play. During the 2017-2018 academic year, key campus leadership positions at NCAA Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) institutions remain overwhelmingly White. For instance, at FBS institutions, Whites account for 86.2% of head football coaches, 84.3% of athletics directors, 87.8% of faculty athletics representatives, and 85.4% of university presidents (Lapchick, 2019).

Nevertheless, disproportionate representation in these sporting spaces, while an indicator of college sport serving as a predominantly White domain, speaks primarily to the *physical state* of college sport as a White space. Furthermore, according to Rios (2017), it is when this “practical” domination of Whites in these spaces interacts with, constructs, and henceforth perpetuates a theoretically entrenched whiteness that works to “reinforce a normative sensibility in settings in which black people are typically absent, not expected, or marginalized when present” (Anderson, 2015, p. 10). In other words, it can be contextually surmised that as a result of this pervasive, rather normative, understanding of whiteness in college sport, White athletes

may be afforded the privilege of choosing whether or not to recognize race as a factor in their athletic experiences. Hence, college sport becomes a White space in both the physical and theoretical sense.

For instance, in a recent study Hextrum (2019) examined the intersection of whiteness and college athletics by discussing the institutional level processes that insulate White college athletes from thinking about and coming to terms with issues of race and racism. Although building on recent contributions of scholars who have addressed the interrelationships between institutions of higher education, whiteness, and the reproduction (and reinforcement) of systemic racism more broadly (Cabrera, 2014, 2018; Cabrera, Watson, & Franklin, 2016; Leonardo, 2015), Hextrum mischaracterized the likes of extant research studies in sport-related disciplines (Gill, 2007; Lawrence et al., 2016; Vadeboncoeur & Bopp, 2019) as relying on notions of White privilege and stereotypic subjectification, rather than contemporary power dynamics. While these studies speak to and acknowledge White individuals as embodying and performing a racial identity (Fusco, 2005; Hartmann, 2007; McDonald, 2005), they do so with the intention of examining power relations and racialized performance(s) through the perceptions and articulated meanings of Whites themselves. To not recognize Whites as comprising an identity – albeit one that is flexible, unstable, and predicated on power – is detrimental to further implicating, deconstructing, and ultimately achieving a better understanding of whiteness and its pervasive effects in sport.

It is from this perspective that White racial identity can be thought of as comprising two distinct aspects, “that whiteness is at the heart of racial matters... [and that] there is a difference between whiteness as a racial formation and the particular situations of whites in specific locales” (Hartigan, 2010, p. 202). Based on “specific locale(s),” are White individuals cognizant of a “shared set of social relations with other whites” (p. 203), and in turn, how do they explain this consciousness – or lack thereof? As has been already noted, while extant literature in sport studies scholarship has long since engaged with the intersection(s) of race, whiteness, and sport, there remains a dearth of inquiry on not only how these intersections take place within college sport, but also, how White college athletes understand whiteness and interpret its relative impact on their sporting experiences as well as those of their racially marginalized counterparts. For the purposes of this study, we seek to deconstruct and interpret said understandings of whiteness as they exist within this sporting context, specifically from the positional lens of the White college athlete. More narrowly, through an interpretative phenomenological approach, this study aims to better understand and explicate the interpretation, meaning, and significance of whiteness among a group of self-identified White college athletes.

## Theoretical Perspective

### *White Dialectics*

Utilizing a modified grounded theory approach, Todd and Abrams (2011) engaged in dialogue with White undergraduate students on topics relating to race and racism, examining any contradictions exhibited by the students. The tensions producing these contradictions were subsequently developed and labeled as “White dialectics.” White dialectics, or the tensions that Whites experience as dominant cultural and social group members, is a metatheory that explains the dialectical movement (behavioral, cognitive, and/or emotive) that Whites exhibit when engaging with or reflecting on their whiteness. Therefore, Whites move along six dialectical

poles, each of which is comprised of an underlying continuum and opposing end points: (a) awareness and identification with whiteness ↔ denial or unawareness of whiteness; (b) close multiracial relationships ↔ shallow or nonexistent relationships; (c) acknowledgement of racial differences ↔ colorblind ideology; (d) cognizant of implicit role in racism ↔ detachment from racial implication; (e) awareness of structural racism ↔ structural racism not to blame; and (f) recognition of White privilege ↔ denial or shallow understanding of White privilege.

According to Sue (2011), resistance towards this movement is caused by an internal dissonance experienced by Whites as it concerns the reconciliation between understanding one's biases and prejudiced disposition, and personal convictions of good morality. As a result, Whites may actively resist this dialectical change, or rather the acknowledgement of themselves as cultural or racial beings, the antecedents of which are described by Sue as a set of four White fears. These include the fear of appearing racist, realizing one's racism, confronting White privilege, and taking responsibility to end racism. While considered at the individual (or personal) level, these fears culminate as not only the driving force behind this dialectical struggle, but also the continued denial and minimization of the racialized experiences of racial and ethnic minorities (Sue, 2011). When applied to the college sport setting, White athletes may feel it difficult to acknowledge and/or internalize their racial identity, which when coupled with this process of internal reconciliation can serve to highlight the tensions that may arise for these athletes in this racialized space (Vadeboncoeur & Bopp, 2019). Although theorized within the field of counseling psychology, it is our contention that this framework can serve as a theoretical foundation upon which the racialized experiences of White college athletes, which may account for how they confront and perceive their White racial identity within these sporting spaces, can be better assessed.

## Method

### *Methodological Approach*

An inquiry-based approach was selected, as grounded in and intellectually connected to hermeneutics, or a theoretical perspective that positions meaning as a derivation of cultural context and the subsequent interpretation of said context (Patton, 2002). This approach, known as interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), attempts to examine a participant's perception of a personal, lived experience (Smith & Osborn, 2004). Nevertheless, while connected to hermeneutics by way of the researcher's interpretation of a participant's personal account, IPA is also epistemologically positioned relative to phenomenology. For instance, a participant's subjective account may allow for a better understanding of a particular phenomenon, such that "[t]he participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world" (p. 54). Thus, the researcher finds a point of access to the participant's lived experience through their personal accounts, as well as through the researcher's assumptions and prior conceptions.

### *Participants*

Purposeful sampling was utilized to select participants for this study. In particular, Patton (2002) identified criterion sampling as a means of purposeful sampling that involves the review of all cases that meet an important, predetermined criterion. As participants, these athletes,

regardless of gender identification, needed to meet two criteria: (a) presently participate or have participated in intercollegiate athletics at the NCAA Division I level; and (b) racially self-identify as non-Hispanic White. Access to participants was gained through our experiences and present roles as sport management researchers and course instructors, whereby we initially invited participants via (a) email blast to several undergraduate and graduate level sport management classes, as well as (b) through personal invitation based on existing relationships with us, the researchers. Additionally, these individuals were asked to help identify potential participants they believed to meet the criteria of this study. As such, snowball sampling was employed to maximize the breadth of the sample. As noted by Singer (2005), negotiating access to college athletes can be a difficult endeavor. Thus, to successfully gain access to conduct research with these individuals, we felt the sampling strategies employed were particularly useful given our past experiences with this population and our desire to obtain more exploratory knowledge concerning the broader scope of this study. Moreover, it should be noted that we sought and subsequently received approval from both our university's institutional review board (IRB) and a sub-committee from within our university's athletic department to commence our sampling procedures.

In all, the participants in this study were seven non-Hispanic White (both current and former) college athletes who competed at various mid-size and large Northeastern, Southeastern, and Western universities in the United States. The mean age of participants was 24 years (ranging from 21 to 31 years). Amongst participants who identified as female ( $n = 5$ ), the mean age was 23 years (ranging from 21 to 24), whereas those who identified as male ( $n = 2$ ) held a mean age of 27 years (23 and 31). Demographic characteristics such as gender, age, sport of participation, years of college participation, and location of school are provided in Table 1. Although a small sample size at first glance, a defining feature of IPA methodology is a commitment to a detailed interpretative account of pertinent cases, which Smith and Osborn (2004) submit can only be (realistically) achieved with a very small sample, thus allowing for a "detailed examination of similarity and difference, convergence and divergence" (p. 57). Given that the "aim of the study is to say something in detail about the perceptions and understandings of this particular group rather than prematurely make more general claims," we believe that seven is a useful number for our sample (p. 55).

Table 1

*Participant Information*

Name (Pseudonym)	Gender Identification	Age	Sport of Participation	Years of Collegiate Participation	Geographic Location of University
Matthew	Male	23	Volleyball	Four	West
Grace	Female	23	Cross Country	Four	Mid-Atlantic
Laura	Female	24	Swimming & Diving	Four	Southeast
Irene	Female	23	Track & Field	Four	Southeast
Anna	Female	24	Track & Field	Four	Southeast
Danny	Male	31	Baseball	Three	Southeast
Erin	Female	21	Basketball	Four	Southeast

### *Positionality*

Each interview was designed and conducted by the principal investigator – a heterosexual, cis-gendered White male who embraces a critical perspective with a particular interest in the theoretical traditions of interpretivism and critical inquiry. As a scholar, he is engaged in the critical studies of whiteness and critical race theory, considers himself to be pro-feminist, and has been influenced by emancipatory epistemologies and pedagogies. Moreover, his research is located within a critical research paradigm that understands all knowledge and lived experiences to be constructed within a socio-historical context, as mediated by power relations (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). Given his affirmative disposition toward emancipatory, constructivist, and post-colonial feminist perspectives, he believed a critical framework to best serve the purposes of this study. Likewise, the second researcher identifies as a heterosexual, cis-gendered White male and was diligently mindful of how his social location(s) may have influenced his understanding and interpretation of the experiences collected in this study, wherein he continuously engaged in reflexive practice (e.g., consistency checks) – both individually and in collaborative discussion with the principal investigator. Thus, and in alignment with Narayan and Harding's (2000) epistemological and methodological meaning of feminism, we believe that research should wield a critical deconstruction of the epistemological, institutional, and societal manifestations of racism, Eurocentrism, and monoculturalism, the nuanced frameworks of which operate to structure our ways of thinking and embodied interactions.

To conduct and produce accountable cultural and racial knowledge “requires analytic means of looking at the processes of knowledge production, rather than bracketing these or dismissing them as of no importance in epistemological terms” (Stanley, 2004, p. 13), wherein the researcher must acknowledge, accept, and integrate a certain level of reflexivity that accounts for the power dynamic that may exist between researcher and participants. Thus, our approach to subjectivity has been to incorporate self-reflection with each participant interaction. Through the analysis, the principal investigator (in collaboration with the second researcher) continuously asked how his embodiment as a White male interviewer influenced the responses of his participants, as well as attended to the extent to which his social location informed subsequent interpretations of the data. Since the goal of the study was to better understand how White college athletes make sense of their racial identity and understand their racialized experiences within the college sporting context, we acknowledged and embraced our subjectivity as part and parcel to the analysis process.

Furthermore, on account of this intersection between subjectivity and privilege resulting from said social locations, we would like to acknowledge the potential danger of enacting the very same privileges which we had set out to implicate and assess. Todd and Abrams (2011) understood this danger to be invoked on account of (a) writing about White individuals to a presumed, primarily White readership; and (b) partaking in a subconscious process of collusion with my participants to perpetuate said White privilege. Moreover, at the beginning of each interview, the principal investigator verbalized his racial self-identification and asked that the participant do the same – given this shared identity, it should be acknowledged that this may very well have served to allow the principal investigator's racial identity to fade into the background and allow participants to be more forthcoming in their commentary. As such, we made sure to continuously ask how the interview context may have influenced the responses of our participants. Thus, we did our best to be cognizant of personal assumptions of biases toward

participants, take the time to internally reflect upon personal intentions and motives behind our research, examine participants' experiences from a lens that is devoid of a monolithic perspective, and understand the potential limitations of our cultural and racial identities in examining the lived experiences of those who may share those same identity sources (Gasman & Payton-Stewart, 2006).

### *Procedures*

As a result of time and spatial availability, the principal investigator conducted semi-structured interviews both in-person ( $n = 6$ ) and via telephone ( $n = 1$ ) between June and October 2018. Prior to each interview, participants were provided an informed consent form. While no participants declined participation in the study, we considered informed consent to be a continuous process and were steadfast in reminding each participant of their agency to refuse to answer, skip, or transition away from questions with which they did not feel comfortable engaging. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by Rev.com, a professional transcription service. Upon electronic delivery, each transcript was reviewed in accordance with the audio recording to verify accuracy, as well as to ensure that the participants' respective communication styles were preserved. Moreover, only certain phrases or words that may have compromised anonymity for the participants were edited. Thus, in order to maintain anonymity, as well as provide credibility and trustworthiness to the collected data, each participant was assigned a pseudonym as well as provided a copy of the interview transcript for their review and to conduct preliminary member checks.

The interview guide was constructed with the intent of eliciting the racialized experiences (both personal and athletic) of the participants along the tenets delineated in White dialectics. Each interview commenced by asking the participants to discuss their family background and upbringing before transitioning to a pointed focus on the racial identity of the participant. Although this transition may be viewed as an abrupt incursion, we argue that a key aim of this study is to understand how whiteness might inform the participants' athletic experiences. As a result, initially gleaning for insight into the participants' racial identity (and by extension, the relative salience of that identity source) lays the foundation for a better understanding as to their contextually-relevant and nuanced experience(s). Additionally, participants were posed questions relating to their engagement with topics of race prior to and during their college athletic career, interactions with individuals who were non-White within the intercollegiate setting, recollection of incidents of either overt and/or covert discrimination, and on the potentially differing experiences of White and non-White college athletes.

### *Data Analysis*

Interviews were analyzed utilizing template analysis, a form of thematic analysis whereby qualitative data is analyzed and subsequently categorized in hierarchical clusters. Of central importance to template analysis is developing a coding template, which serves to not only summarize themes deemed by the researcher to be important in the data set, but also organizes them in a manner that is both useful and meaningful (King, 2012). Moreover, template analysis allows for the use of "a priori" themes, "allowing researchers to define some themes in advance of the analysis process [...] ensuring focus on key areas potentially relevant to a study, building on existing theory, and developing ideas in linked pieces of research" (Brooks, McCluskey, Turley, & King, 2015, p. 218). Although a methodological approach such as IPA, given its



phenomenological stance, requires a more open disposition towards data analysis, the use of a priori themes allowed for analysis to be initially structured by and guided around a research focus on White dialectics. This model was deemed as a useful framework for further exploring the racialized beliefs and experiences of White college athletes, and thus, is a logical launching pad for this exploratory work. Thus, our intention is to remain both sensitive to the thematic areas of White dialectics and maintain an open phenomenological position.

Steps involved in the analysis process (in accordance with King, 2012) included the following: (a) a thorough reading and re-reading of each interview transcript to gain familiarity with the data; (b) preliminary thematic coding of the interview data in accordance with the White dialectics framework to establish a priori themes, while also being mindful of any new emergent themes that would be deemed relevant to the study; (c) the development of an initial coding template that accounted for any relationships between and within both existing and emergent themes; and (d) the application of the coding template to the interview data to ensure it represented an appropriate, yet comprehensive interpretation of the data. The final coding template consisted of themes derived from the White dialectics framework and those which emerged from the analysis process. Overlap was accounted for through meaningful clustering.

## Results and Discussion

As each of the participants discussed their respective racialized experiences within the college sporting context, three commonalities emerged: (a) self-understanding(s) of White racial identity; (b) (un)intended meaning-making in multiracial relationships; and (c) structural inequality. In order to best (re)present the “connections between events, the passage of time, and individual intentions,” we engage and utilize a number of short, direct quotes; here, the overarching goal was to best preserve “the individual’s story without our interpretation intervening while, at the same time, becoming familiar with each individual case” (McAlpine, 2016, p. 43). As such, the following is a detailed, yet contextualized discussion of each theme.

### *Self-Understanding(s) of White Racial Identity*

Given the overwhelming representation of Whites in collegiate athletics, this sporting realm serves as a predominantly White domain that affords White athletes the privilege of choosing whether or not to recognize race as a factor in their athletic experiences. It is on the latter end of this theorized continuum that Whites display a poor connection to a White social group membership, which they perceive as holding limited connection with their perceived sense of self. In minimizing their membership in this social group, White college athletes perceived the label of “White” as serving the function of a general category encompassing all individuals with White skin and representing no definitive culture or social identity. For instance, Anna remarked that:

To me it's just a color, it's just I don't really, I only identify as White because that's the color of my skin. But I guess another way to put it is that all races have different ways about them because of their culture. I would say, I don't know. I guess whatever the stereotype is of being White, that's probably how I would explain it. But mostly it's just a color to me. That's just all I see it as.

Other participants admitted that they had never engaged with (either internally or with others) the ontology of their whiteness prior to the interview, affirming a disconnection with their whiteness of being. Matthew stated that, “it's always been part of who I am, but it's not a huge part of how I identify,” to which he added, “it's just one of those things where I've always just kind of assumed that that's just who I was and I've really just never put a ton of weight onto that sort of stuff before.” Similarly, Grace pointed to this cognizance of a visible whiteness, even going as far as to consider it a part of her identity, having stated, “that’s kind of as far as I think about it, I guess” – but again, observed was her recognition of personal whiteness yet not a deeper understanding of its meaning(s). This sentiment was embodied through Danny’s assertion that whiteness, to him, was both difficult to attribute meaning to and something from which meaning could be gleaned, such that:

You know honestly ... I guess [it means] nothing. It's just a label. You know, I can't really think of anything that would really mean to me besides just being White [...] I guess people would say White is kind of the non-cultural thing, that we don't have a background or a history that you know of. It's just kind of there.

Moreover, some participants, as they began to identify more openly as being White, were quick to distance themselves from such a label. Although submitting that her attachment to a particularly salient White identity was limited, Erin understood the importance of acknowledging the reality of said identity:

Being White doesn't really mean anything to me. Being Erin means something to me. Obviously being White is a part of that and that's something that you have to acknowledge because there's things like ... in this country there are things such as White privilege and whiteness and all these different things.

However, dialectically speaking, Erin was quick to reaffirm her detachment from a salient racial identity and asserted “White” to be more so a categorical identifier, rather than an identity source that has (and continues) to inform her lived experience(s):

Being white to me means that I just have a different background. I have different things that I have to work against than other people do. I don't think I was taught to be white. I feel like more often than not, granted you have, on certain things you circle White or non-White, things like that. So in terms of identifying as white on paper, yes. But I feel like to me, I identify more as I'm part Italian and part German, versus saying White. I don't know why that is but that's just to be kind of frank. I don't really necessarily identify as being White.

In a similar dialectical movement, Grace initially mentioned that her whiteness was not of particular salience, however, she was able to impart meaning in her being White as it concerns intentioned praxis by fellow White individuals:

I think it's important for White people to recognize that they are privileged just the way that they look, and then if they can use that for any type of positivity or to help

in any kind of conversation that's important, then to use it. I guess that's what it means to me.

As it concerns a dialectical shift, Grace followed by offering commentary that appeared to moderate the sociopolitical implications of whiteness. Echoing Todd and Abrams' (2011) original study, it seemed that forging a link between whiteness and more innocuous claims as skin color and apathetic notions of colorblindness, for instance, served as mechanisms by which participants were able to moderate the relative significance of whiteness as having an informed relationship with their lived experiences:

I don't think it's something that I was ever taught [...] I mean at least in my family, you're just taught to be respectful and to treat everyone with dignity and respect and still stand up for yourself, but take care of yourself and treat others the way you want to be treated. I think that's, whether that's, I don't think that's raising you to be white. That's just raising you to be decent [Grace].

Nevertheless, only one participant happened to engage in dialogue that suggested a positively salient association with their racial identity. Irene, in noting a perceived permanency of her whiteness across the various social spaces within which she moves, stated in part:

Yeah, I mean ... White is definitely a part of my identity, and I mean, it always will be, and I don't think that's a bad thing in my case, because I feel like White people, just the way society works, unfortunately don't have any bias against them as much as people of other races, so it's, even if I didn't want to identify as White, like people look at me, see I'm White, and would identify me as that. So yeah, I'd say definitely, it's part of my identity. It can't be ignored, yeah.

Irene added that “people look at me and like don't think anything of me, like aren't making assumptions, necessarily, because it's normal to be like white I guess, and people don't have too many negative bias ideas against white people.” While it appears that Irene has a more nuanced understanding of the implications of her whiteness, which as it concerns this notion of “whiteness and sense of self” is an accurate assessment, she later engages in dialectical movement while delving further into discussion on whiteness and her sporting experiences (this will be discussed in greater detail in the sections that follow). Again, this serves to highlight not only the fluidity of strong overlaps between each distinct dialectic, but also the ability for dialectical tensions to arise as the individual engages in a process of reconciliation between unconscious racialized behaviors and personal beliefs in a presumed moral disposition.

### *(Un)Intended Meaning-Making in Multiracial Relationships*

According to Todd and Abrams (2011), tensions can emerge for Whites within the context of multiracial relationships, which may be perceived as either interpersonal hurt, social exclusion, and/or challenges associated with connecting across race. For instance, Matthew noted that in competing in a sport (men's volleyball) that is primarily comprised of White males, he was able to gain a greater awareness of his own whiteness in “those rare instances where either team mates or people you're competing against weren't white and didn't come from similar

backgrounds.” Matthew added that, “when you're surrounded by people who look like you, come from a similar background ... it's not one of those things you necessarily think about so much, right? Because you're part of the majority group.”

In a similar vein, Erin discussed the challenges of not only engaging in, but also fostering multiracial relationships in her time as a college athlete. Erin recalled:

I kind of started reflecting on some of the other interactions that I've had with teammates and coaches and some of those other people, but I feel like it was hard at times, I'm not going to lie, to relate to certain things that they had gone through. Simply because I just have never experienced that. But I think for me, I was more focused on listening and seeing what I could learn from them. Then just saying, "I'm just going to be there for you" versus telling them, "This is how it was for me." I did share those experiences, and like, well I never got to experience that. I want to help you through these different experiences and things. But it wasn't ever like a put me down. You could definitely tell there were just differences. That's just all they were, they were differences.

It is evident that Erin, in recognizing her own apprehensions in navigating these multiracial interactions on her team, understood that as a result of her own lived experience, she was beholden to certain limitations in fully conceptualizing the experience of teammates from racially marginalized communities. As such, she discussed utilizing strategies that allowed for her to listen and learn, while at the same time provide a platform for her teammates to share to the extent that they were comfortable.

Conversely, while other participants shared the challenges they experienced in these interactions, not all were as self-reflective in understanding their implication within the context of said relationships. For instance, Laura mentioned that she was roommates with the only Black female swimmer on her university's swimming and diving team. Laura noted that her sport was predominantly White in terms of participation, which she acknowledged allowed for her roommate to “stand out” from the rest of the team and even teams against whom they competed. Nevertheless, she asserted that “it never affected our friendship or our relationship or anything going on in the team. It was obviously something that was noticeable because she was the only one ... I don't think [it] affected my experience as a student athlete.” When asked to reflect on how this might have impacted the experience of her roommate, Laura remarked that:

I never really thought much of it, but I guess until she brings it to my attention is when I notice. Maybe I'm one of a million. If anything, I think it's great, but she stands out. I think that's cool, whereas I'm just another one of 60 athletes that are on the team that has no identity other than who I am. That was just another aspect of her being able to stand out which I think is cool. I never felt bad or was saddened by the fact that she was the only one of her kind, but I also don't know if she felt differently. I have no idea. I think it was cool that she was unique.

Moreover, Todd and Abrams (2011) noted that for those Whites experiencing dialectical movement, awareness of race, self-reflection, and resolve through unintended racist pitfalls were crucial in not only navigating through hurt and exclusion, but also in developing and maintaining multiracial relationships. A similar phenomenon played out in conversations with two particular

college athletes. While not necessarily focused on navigating potential exclusionary circumstances, the two athletes in question exhibited dialectical movement in discussing the nature of interracial relationships with fellow teammates and people of color, as signified by the interplay of “White debt” and “color capital.” White debt refers to the belief that racial identity, for Whites, is cultureless, empty, or lacking in some manner, the remedy for which is fulfilled through the accrument of color capital, or the practice of “converting relationships with people and object symbolically coded non-white ... into a kind of credentialing form of capital” (Hughey, 2010, p. 1299).

Underlying this notion of color capital is the move toward racial meaning-making, which takes the form of objectification (of people of color) for the fulfillment of self-legitimation. For instance, having admitted that she had rarely engaged with issues of race and racism prior to her coming to college, Irene was proud of the fact that she was able to quickly access a level of cultural competency that had been made previously inaccessible on account of her upbringing:

I think, for me, I'm the kind of person like I had never really been challenged like that before, but I would say that I like fit in and like adapted with people who were different from me, like I think much easier maybe than some of my other teammates, I would say. Like I could, I don't know ... I just have realized that going to college and being with people who look different from me and are different from me made me realize kind of how good I am in those situations and how well I adapt and like how I don't really have too much bias or any of that kind of stuff.

Here, it is apparent that Irene engages in practice of self-recognition for her perceived lack of racial biases, however, she fails to acknowledge her own implication within the racialized structures that produce the very discriminatory rhetoric she claims to espouse and rather, views the progression toward anti-racist embodiment as more of an innate ability and less a nuanced journey of humility and self-reflection. It is in this same vein that Irene went on to add:

Like I said, it wasn't really a challenge for me just because I almost find that I fit in with people who are Black more than I fit in with people who are White and I'm not really sure why that is. But I was super comfortable, and most of my friends are Black, but I also have White friends [...] I obviously felt comfortable with my White teammates, but I also felt equally as comfortable with my Black teammates. I feel like that's something that maybe other White teammates of mine wouldn't say, that they wouldn't feel as comfortable with their Black teammates.

Irene displays her engagement with sentiments of self-legitimation, this time as an “interlocutor” between sprinters and jumpers on the predominantly Black track and field team, and runners on the primarily White cross country team. Again, Irene is able to speak to the importance of moving toward a racially conscious identity, wherein she argued that, “you really have to make the conscious effort to kind of break out of that bubble that you put yourself in, and a lot of people don't do that, or don't realize that they're even in a bubble.” However, she oftentimes followed with statements such as, “I mean in college, like I said, the majority of my friends and teammates were black,” without a contextualization of why she preferred the presence of her Black teammates or how she was able to engage in the same conscious practices – as per her suggestions for other Whites – of rearticulating a positive White identity. Thus, witnessed is self-

legitimizing commentary, but when pressed, little nuanced (read outright) explanation is offered as to what constitutes moving toward a more critical understanding of racial matters and what may be driving this preference to be in the presence of people of color.

Similarly, Anna mentioned that despite never having had much exposure to experiences and topics of race or racism growing up, she was confident in her assertion that:

I would say probably close to half of my friend group in college and even still today, half of my friend group, they were African American. Because being a hurdler at [Anna's university], that's the culture of your teammates to do the same event. I would say one of my best friends was, she's actually Mexican. Three of them were African American, probably three more were white, Caucasian, so definitely a good mix for me.

When asked to discuss whether there is/was ever a point in her interactions with teammates of color where it is/was challenging or natural to engage, Anna offered the following:

I have the type of personality where I can get along with anyone and I've always been very well liked by those around me. From the age of five, I was participating on sports teams that were very diverse. I've never had problems with people of different backgrounds.

However, she would go on to note that as it concerns race, there was a noticeable difference in communication between herself (and other Whites) and fellow teammates of color:

I being White communicate differently than they do and vice versa. It's just different cultures. I will say that that was a hard thing, was seeing how easily they would bond with each other and knowing that it's just not naturally how I am to communicate in those certain ways. But other than that, no, it's just they all loved me. I loved all of them.

The latter portion of the aforementioned statement by Anna is similar in sentiment to the self-legitimizing mechanisms utilized by Irene in her respective commentary, wherein a blanket generalization is provided to moderate any personal accountability or broader structural consciousness as to why these nuances in communication may be occurring within these relationships. As it relates to the interplay between color capital and White debt, Anna offered the following perceptions and self-perceptions of racial identity in relation to her teammates:

My whole life I've had African American teammates and I've loved them. I remember making a comment to my track coach with all my teammates around saying, "Yeah, I just, I wish I was Black. You guys are so lucky. You guys are better singers, you're better athletes. You guys have, you guys are way funnier than White people." I've always admired other cultures and other races because they have so much to offer.

In challenging her to expand on this notion of African Americans “having so much to offer” and from where said thoughts may have originated (personal to her, that is), Anna reiterated much of what was stated in her previous statements:

I would just say maybe the environment that I was in our conference, every amazing athlete happened to be African American. Clearly observing my teammates and how they are at parties and at practice and they have so much life and they dance and they're great at it. Then you see some of the distance people and people like me who are White and we can't dance for anything.

Through the accounts of both Irene and Anna, on display is a paradoxical (or for the purposes of this analysis, dialectical) movement between “self-perceptions of racial emptiness and longing for contact with non-Whites” (Hughey, 2012, p. 170), the nature of which does little to disrupt the normative power of whiteness. In its pervasive, yet malleable ontological state of being, whiteness is able to protect itself from the practice of intragroup meaning-making, such that conscious and unconscious contradictions as it relates to individualized identity articulation can occur outside the confines of structured whiteness. At the end of the day, whiteness remains a structured reality that allows for said contradictions to materialize in the first place. In our case, to wield color capital is to alleviate oneself of a perceived White debt, the machinations of which serve to explain the process of racial meaning-making for Whites.

### *Structural Inequality*

Despite some participants displaying an understanding of structural inequalities (as they exist in society more broadly), most were unable to conceive an association between race, structural inequalities, and the concept of systemic power constructs within the college sporting context. For instance, most participants were able to demonstrate an understanding of overt racism as perpetrated against people of color, both within and outside of sport, however, when asked to extend this thought process to more covert, structural mechanisms of racism in college sport, participants were hard pressed to offer either first-hand recollection or knowledge on the occurrences of such phenomena.

Grace recalled that, “I didn’t see firsthand anything that I was treated differently as opposed to someone of a different race. I know that it happens, I just didn’t see it firsthand in the student athlete respect.” Similarly, Danny noted that displays of overt discrimination (e.g., fan commentary) against teammates of color occurred while traveling on the road, particularly throughout the American South. However, much like Grace, he acknowledged that White privilege was present, but was unable to provide a response as to how to identify it in the intercollegiate context, instead reiterating what he had previously stated on overt discrimination witnessed while traveling with his team. Others like Laura, who understood the presence of race-related issues in the United States, were unable to identify either overt or covert forms of discrimination in college sport, even going as far as to suggest the following:

I think there are still race issues going on in the world, but if anything I think that college sports are helping it. It brings more backgrounds together for one common purpose and one common goal. I think it's a good thing for race issues and what's

going on in the world. We have it pretty balanced across all aspects in college sports.

Despite the aforementioned understandings and misunderstandings on the nature of structural inequality in the intercollegiate setting, one issue that was mentioned, either explicitly or in passing dialogue, by most participants was academic stereotype threat as faced by Black college athletes, particularly males. According to Fuller, Harrison, and Bukstein (2016), African American male college athletes are subject to engaging in the internalization of a perceived role that emphasizes their identity as an athlete compared to that of a student. For example, Harrison, Sailes, Rotich, and Bimper (2011) noted that unlike their White teammates, African American college football players internalized a more salient athletic identity and as a result, held sport as the primary focus in their life. It is in a similar manner that Irene spoke to this interplay between athletics and academics, particularly as it relates to outside perception (by Whites) and self-internalization (by Blacks):

Yeah I mean like I said, people make assumptions that the only reason the Black person can get into college is because they're an athlete or because even if they're not an athlete, because they need to meet a certain quota of having a certain amount of diverse students on campus, so you got in because you were Black and you took the spot of a White person. It definitely applies to college sport because the nature of college athletics is sometimes these athletes that are coming in are coming from lower socioeconomic status and have had less opportunities or not as good of an education coming into college so that they are less prepared and aren't at the same standards sometimes as their white counterparts. So it just feeds into the reputation of it because they'll see someone in their class who is struggling with writing, like their grammar isn't up to par and they're like, "Well they only got into college because they're an athlete." I think that definitely plays into it.

In almost the same breath, Erin spoke to similar notions of a racialized stigma relating to academics:

I feel like there is a stigma of ... that people give Black college athletes more grief in terms of like, they think that all White college athletes are good at school and their sport and this and that. But I feel like that's way far from the truth because I feel like there's been plenty of people that I have met that have been like, scholarly athletes of the year and they've gotten other types of scholarships, so they could've come here on an academic scholarship.

For Laura, she wondered whether “they fear, as an African American athlete, you feel more classified as an athlete and not as much as a student because of the general population of students around you.” Further contextualizing this thought, she reflected on personal implication:

Maybe as a White athlete I felt like I fit in more in the classroom as well as on the athletic field so I didn't feel like I was classified just as an athlete when I walk into a classroom. People have to ask me if I'm a student athlete. They don't really know. Maybe as an African American, you walk into a classroom and they assume that



you're an athlete or you look like an athlete. Maybe just the way that you're judged in just being around campus, more of an athlete than the whole student-athlete perspective.

However, Laura went on to add:

I would say athlete to athlete, it's not like I feel like one was treated better than the other. I think we were all treated pretty equally. Just maybe the way that we were viewed by society and the rest of campus might be a little bit different.

It is here that we see Laura make a dialectical turn away from the structural implications of the intercollegiate setting and toward a more minimizing rhetoric that retrenches meritocratic notions informing the very same racialized stigma driving this marginalizing on-campus experience for Black college athletes. Matthew expressed similar thoughts, first acknowledging how professors/instructors, as well as academic advisors and career services staff members were all complicit in propagating the stereotype that White athletes were more academically prepared and higher achievers than their Black counterparts. Nevertheless, Matthew moderated these statements by suggesting that:

A lot of the Whites and athletes went into it with a plan of, okay this is what I'm here for, this is what I want to do, how can you help me get to this point? Whereas I think even at a place like that [Matthew's university], a good chunk of these African American basketball players, their thought, their assumption was, "Hey this is just my path to get to professional basketball and the NBA."

Although the argument could be made that what Matthew asserted was to further contextualize the practice of enrolling college athletes whose academic preparedness was not reflective of the larger general student population, the underlying tone borders on a value judgment of those perceived to be participating in intercollegiate athletics for the sole purpose of obtaining a future professional career in sport. By falling into this potential logic trap, one is at risk of replicating, if not emboldening, the very same rhetoric that is utilized to uphold the stigmatized status of Black (and other people of color) college athletes in these spaces.

## Conclusion and Implications

This study sought to move towards a nuanced understanding of how White athletes confront their whiteness and perceive the relative significance of being White within the college sporting context. In either not perceiving or minimizing their racial identity, White athletes perceived the label of "White" as serving the function of a general category encompassing all individuals with White skin and representing no definitive culture or social identity. By forging a link between whiteness and physical skin color, this served as a mechanism by which participants were able to moderate any sociopolitical implications of whiteness. Moreover, participants expressed challenges associated with connecting across race. Although this did not limit their social interactions with teammates of color, White athletes struggled to concede any personal accountability or broader structural consciousness as to the context(s) of these relationships. Here, particularly for those experiencing dialectical movement an awareness of

race, self-reflection, and resolve through unintended racist pitfalls were crucial in developing and maintaining multiracial relationships. Lastly, participants were hard pressed to conceive of an association between race, structural inequalities, and the concept of systemic power constructs within the college sporting context.

While no individual is immune from the processes of socialization or inheritance of racial biases, White Americans are subject to the adoption of assumptions, stereotypes, and racialized attitudes of previous societal generations. At the heart of this is the racial framing of society, whereby White cognitive processes are normalized through a process that is “active and directing, it is learned at parent’s knee, in school, and from the media; and, once learned, it both guides and rationalizes discriminatory behavior” (Feagin, 2013, p. 16). Given the institutional context, Whites may be exposed and henceforth forced to acknowledge and reconcile these unconscious racial assumptions and biases, the awareness of which may compel individuals to deny not only their own racial identity, but also the racial reality of people of color (Sue, 2011). However, this is not meant as an essentialization of all Whites, but rather an opportunity to demonstrate that as a collective entity, whiteness promotes the adoption of a structural unawareness when in reality, Whites are cognizant of both the personal and systematic implications of race (Leonardo, 2009). Nevertheless, it is understandable that whether one’s racialized knowledge or understanding of whiteness, as a White individual, is conscious, unconscious, or somewhere in between may be a contentious topic of discussion. Regardless of intentionality, it can be asserted that as Whites confront their whiteness and the significance of race in their day-to-day lives, they may engage in a number of strategies to reconcile this discomfort, which may include denying the importance of their whiteness, shifting the broader discussion from race to other social identities, and/or emotionally removing themselves from either inward or outward conjecture on the matter (Goodman & Jackson, 2012).

However, how might the experiences of our participants be uniquely reflective of the college athlete experience? First, the White dialectics framework, which served as our guiding theoretical perspective, was affirmed through the conversations held with our participants. This framework was initially developed by Todd and Abrams (2011) from an undergraduate student sample, which accounted for the cognitive and emotional tensions observed by the participants when engaging with topics of race and racism, whereby said tensions produced contradictions along six dialectical poles (or themes). As a result, our satisfaction with the White dialectics framework is grounded in the belief that our findings are reflective of the same tensions that may be occurring among the general population of college students. While this is not to conflate the experiences of the college athlete and non-athlete student, we do submit that the manners by which White college athletes confront and internalize their whiteness is uniquely informed by the university (experiential) setting.

Generally considered to be a period of one’s life defined by intellectual, personal, and interpersonal development, the intercollegiate experience was found to afford many of the participants the opportunity to engage with teammates and other athletes from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. For some, this was their first instance of regular interaction with people of color. However, despite these multiracial interactions, participants were observed to be in a liminal space between active engagement with the racialized identities of teammates, and the internalized tension of compartmentalizing their own racial identity. Although counter to the findings of Potuto and O’Hanlon (2007) that participation in college sport held a positive effect on White athletes in terms of tolerance and understanding of teammates of color, the experiences shared by our participants suggest racially diverse encounters at the college level for White

individuals can engender a period of identity exploration and meaning-making of not only these encounters, but their own identity sources, goals, and values (Mercer & Cunningham, 2003). Thus, the manners by which White college athletes in this study confronted and made sense of their whiteness were as expected, particularly given socialization patterns that may render them with an inability – or lack thereof expectations – to think of their life choices as being influenced by either race or racism, let alone consider themselves as a racial or cultural being.

Nevertheless, how can White college athletes be held accountable on not only issues of race and racism, but in better understanding themselves as racial beings that are implicated within the racialized contours of college sport? To provide a more pragmatic linkage between theory and practice in this regard is worthwhile, but a difficult endeavor that is further muddled by the fact that White college athletes exist in seemingly White cultural and social environments and are subjected to educational experiences that are primarily monocultural in nature (Cabrera, 2018). For instance, Hextrum (2019) noted that White college athletes, on account of growing up in ostensibly segregated communities, bring with them underdeveloped understandings of race and racism; in turn, universities and athletic departments fail to (re)educate them upon arrival, furthering “racial segregation, innocence, and protection” and allowing “White athletes to dodge their role in racism and avoid racial justice responsibilities” (p. 2).

Similarly, Cabrera and Corces-Zimmerman (2017) reported that even in spite of classroom curriculum that was aimed at challenging and re-framing the racialized understandings of White college students, this population was still found to be immune from engaging with a more meaningful racial knowledge given their location within primarily White spaces. This is not meant to essentialize the experience of White college athletes nor White college students more broadly; rather, this is to assert that (a) on one hand, you have the aforementioned notions of a whiteness that is devoid of any acknowledged cultural or racial attachment; and (b) on the other, you have racial meaning-making that falls outside the confines of whiteness (Hughey, 2012), as witnessed through the accounts of participants in the present study. Thus, it becomes important to better understand the different contours of whiteness as they exist within college sport and in turn, be able to best address them in practice.

Again, to do so lies at the heart of our earlier posed question on how to hold White college athletes accountable to racial matters and to themselves as racial beings. Despite their findings, Cabrera and Corces-Zimmerman (2017) argued that diversity-based education for White college students is not futile, but in need of a re-orientation that centers issues of marginalization in a context that is systemic, yet contemporary in approach. As it concerns White college athletes, universities and athletic departments alike need to provide a much more systematically-oriented instruction for their college athletes to think about and internalize how identity sources such as race, ethnicity, gender, and social class are shaped not only by the interactions within a given athletic space, but by the bigger structural contexts within which those interactions may take place. Moreover, by doing so, White athletes can be provided with the skills needed to navigate both personal and athletic spaces at the intercollegiate level, while at the same time identify and understand how socio-cultural and -economic assumptions, biases, determinants, and inequities serve to shape their understandings of race well in advance before entering these spaces. For example, Cabrera, Watson, and Franklin (2016) posited that for White college students in the early stages of intercultural development and maturity, to avoid any further instance of racial agitation or tension is to provide transformative learning experiences. As such, to better analyze society and themselves through a critical-based lens, Cabrera et al. suggested “a certain degree of agitation is needed to awaken White students to issues or racism

and push them from racial apathy toward racial cognizance” (p. 131). To realize and promote this level of individual growth is for a comprehensive effort on the part of university campus constituents – that is, to make the “invisible (i.e., whiteness) visible, while creating campus structures that foster targeted and intentional racial discomfort for White students as a means of promoting both individual growth and racial justice” (p. 132).

Taken together, it is imperative to underscore not only the nature by which Whites are granted privileges and positional power, but also, and more importantly, how White college athletes understand this discourse to affect their life choices and those of teammates and other sporting stakeholders of color. By asserting that Whites do in fact have a working racial knowledge is to hold them accountable to actions and decisions influenced by race, and to make visible and substantiate their central presence as active participants in a racialized society (Leonardo, 2009). As per Carrington (2013), sport serves “as an important site for the (re)production of racial meanings, discourses, and identities” (p. 388), the likes of which were witnessed through the narratives of the White college athletes in this study. It is our hope that this study may contribute to continued efforts in advancing our theoretical understanding of not only the ways in which attitudes and beliefs about race influence the racialized (self)perceptions of White college athletes, but also, and more broadly, how whiteness operates in the lived experiences of all racialized individuals situated in diverse sport settings.

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