



Walk It Like You Talk It: A Critical Discourse Analysis of College Athletics Response to the Murder of George Floyd

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In the spring of 2020, George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, was added to the list of countless unarmed Black people killed at the hands of the police. As an entity within higher education, and an enterprise that makes millions of dollars each year on the unpaid labor of Black athletes, college athletic departments were called to take a stand in support of Black lives both on and off playing fields. The purpose of this study was to examine athletic departments' public statements in response to the murder of Floyd. We uncovered four themes: describing what happened, naming and acknowledging emotions, calls for unity and humanity, and calls for action and social responsibility. We conclude the paper by discussing recommendations for how athletic departments can affirm that Black lives matter and address institutionalized racism in both public statements and departmental initiatives.

Keywords: social justice, critical discourse analysis, athletic departments

In the spring of 2020, George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, was added to the list of countless unarmed Black people killed at the hands of the police. The murder of Floyd led to protests, demonstrations, unrest globally, and made issues of systemic and institutionalized racism a critical topic across various aspects of society. Within higher education, college students across the United States participated in social justice demonstrations, and shared stories of the institutionalized racism and racialized harm they had experienced within their campus communities (Kolodner, 2020; Rim, 2020). Over the last several years, it has become common for university leaders to release public statements in response to acts of perceived racism, both on and off-campus (Garcia et al., 2020). While many applaud university leaders for making such statements, prior literature suggests these responses use language and ethos that sustain power and inequality. Furthermore, the statements do not explicitly name or acknowledge the incidences of institutional and/or systemic oppression and do not discuss actionable steps toward institutional change (Cole & Harper, 2017; Garcia et al., 2020; Hypolite & Stewart, 2019). As a student-facing entity and an enterprise that makes millions of dollars each year on the unpaid labor of Black athletes (Gayles et al., 2018; Hawkins, 2010), college athletic departments were also called to take a stand in support of Black lives both on and off playing fields.

Higher education and student affairs leaders facilitate students' moral development by leading by example (Williams & Quarterman, 2008) and engaging in critical reflection and dialogue regarding society's most polarizing issues (Watt, 2015). As such, students look to their institutional leaders in moments of civil unrest. Within college athletics, race and racism continue to be polarizing issues. For example, most athletic departments are led by White individuals (NCAA, 2021b), while most collegiate athletes in revenue-generating sports are Black. Given these racial realities, and a long history of the mismanagement of racial issues in college sports (Rockhill et al., 2021), collegiate athletes looked to their leaders to take a stand against racism and commit to making college campuses more safe, diverse, and inclusive for Black students. While prior literature has explored institutional responses following notable occurrences of civil discord and unrest (Cole & Harper, 2016, Garcia et al., 2020, Jones, 2019, Morton et al., 2020), few have explicitly examined the responses of leaders within athletics. This view is essential, as many Division I athletic departments operate as a separate ecosystem within their institutional environment and culture (Gayles et al., 2018).

The purpose of this study was to examine athletic departments' public statements in response to the murder of George Floyd. The following guiding questions informed our study:

- 1: How did the statements describe the events that took place during the Spring/Summer of 2020?
- 2: What was the overall message of the statements?
- 3: How, if at all, did the statements describe calls for action or actionable next steps within their department and/or teams?

Literature Review

Systemic Racism and Institutional Responsibility

Given the history of race in higher education, colleges and universities in the United States are responsible for acknowledging and addressing institutionalized racism within higher education and society. Many of the nation's most "prestigious institutions" were built to exclude students of color and non-White students implicitly and explicitly (Harper et al., 2009; Hurtado et al., 1999). Moreover, predominantly white institutions (PWIs) are built on land that bore witness to the colonization and genocide of Native and Indigenous people and centuries of enslavement of African people and their descendants (Champagne, 2015; Wilder, 2013). Today, many practices within higher education uphold institutionalized and systemic racism (Harris, 2020). To name a few, issues of college access and admissions, such as standardized testing and the availability of college preparatory curriculum in high schools, are informed by institutionalized racism (Adelman, 2007; Au, 2016). Institutionalized racism is also inherent in how students experience college. Students of color are stereotyped and discriminated against on college campuses (Lewis et al., 2019; Nadal et al., 2014; Solórzano et al., 2000), and Black students are profiled and policed by campus and municipal police on their campuses at a higher rate than other populations of students (Allen & Jacques, 2020; Jenkins et al., 2021). Finally, college sports are an enterprise wherein predominantly white administrators and coaches exploit the labor of Black athletes in football and basketball (Beamon, 2008; Gayles et al., 2018; Hawkins, 2010). This enterprise, wherein Black student-athletes are clustered into specific majors and classes (Fountain & Finley, 2009; Paule-Koba, 2019), graduate at a lower rate than nonathletes and other populations of student-athletes (Ofoegbu et al., 2021; NCAA, 2020), and special admissions policies privilege white student-athletes from wealthy backgrounds (Hextrum, 2021), is inherently racist. In sum, many of the institutions and practices that harm the safety, livelihood, and success of Black students and other students of color are upheld within higher education.

Furthermore, higher education and student affairs practitioners play a role in facilitating the moral and racial identity development of students (Patton et al., 2016). This expectation involves teaching students how to "sit with discomfort, seek critical consciousness, and engage in difficult dialogues" (Watt, 2015, p. 136) and "act as guides to help students understand the role that race plays in society and how to situate themselves in these difficult dialogues" (Watt, 2015, p. 136). Practitioners within athletics share in the responsibility to facilitate the moral and identity development of student athletes. Issues of racism and racial controversy on campus and beyond complicate leaders' ability to foster moral development (Watt, 2015). Herein lies student affairs practitioners' duty to acknowledge and act against racism and other forms of systemic oppression. To facilitate these conversations and support students through challenges related to race and racism, leaders must be willing to acknowledge and grapple with these topics themselves (Watt, 2015).

Institutional Responses to Racist Events

Many studies have explored university leaders' responses to external racist events that gained national attention. For example, Hypolite & Stewart (2019) studied university leaders' responses to the 2016 presidential election and found that the language in these statements was

inclusive, but reproduced existing power structures rather than using disruptive and/or transformative language that could lead to actionable steps toward change. In their study, they concluded that leaders engaged in discursive manipulation (Van Dijk, 2006), explaining that emotional appeals are “often lumped...together as being applicable to students across campus, rather than making a specific statement of support for the most vulnerable student groups” (p. 7-8). Similarly, Morton et al. (2020) examined statements from university presidents following the 2017 white supremacist rallies on the campus of the University of Virginia and the surrounding community of Charlottesville, VA. This study found that the focus of these statements was to comfort and offer solidarity within their university communities and to those in Charlottesville, ponder the scope of free speech, and iterate that such behavior would not be acceptable on their campuses. However, the authors noted that few statements explicitly named the people killed during the rallies or the systemic racism that informed the protests. Both studies recognize university leaders' attempts to make sense of events that did not take place on their campuses but may have affected their students in various ways. Nonetheless, these studies demonstrate that leaders used language that reproduced power and privilege, rather than acknowledge systemic issues and commit to change.

Considering these critical issues, many scholars have used critical discourse analysis to explore university leaders' public responses to racist incidents on campus and off-campus over the last several years. Cole & Harper (2017) found that college presidents were hesitant to name the racism that informed the racist incidents and the institutionalized racism that was pervasive on their campus. Similarly, Jones (2019) found that presidents' responses to racial incidents on their campuses downplayed racism or defined the events through the lens of privilege or colorblindness. Finally, Garcia et al. (2020) analyzed similar statements and found that these statements conveyed the underlying power that administrators held in deciding whether to release a public statement and/or what stance to take. The language in these statements either perpetuated or deconstructed power, privilege, and oppression, and reiterated espoused values rather than committing to actions that advanced diversity, equity, and inclusion. These studies exemplify that while university leaders are releasing statements, they often fall short of acknowledging the prevalence of racism or committing to take steps to address institutionalized racism in their programs and/or policies. The present study will add to this body of literature by evaluating the use of college athletic leadership's language in response to the murder of George Floyd. This event did not physically occur on college campuses, but they have affected college students' experiences and perceptions of their institutions over the last few years. In this study, we hope to make sense of how athletics leaders used these discursive opportunities to address institutionalized racism.

Conceptual Framework

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) functioned as both a theoretical and methodological tool in this study. CDA suggests that social relationships are reproduced, challenged, or uncontested through language and the words we select to describe our experiences and perspectives (Fairclough, 1992). Three core concepts of CDA were fundamental in this study: discourse, ideology, and hegemony (Fairclough, 1992; Hypolite & Stewart, 2019). Discourse refers to the different forms of communication people use to express themselves. Discourse is shaped by the perceptions and worldviews of the author or those in conversation with each other, and the social environment in which the discourse is created and disseminated. Ideology refers to

the shared beliefs that govern a groups' or/and individuals' decision-making and morals. Historically situated ideologies about race, gender, and other social identities, have allowed groups to assert power and/or dominance over other social groups. Racial ideology, for example, is defined as “the racially based frameworks used by actors to explain and justify (dominant race) or challenge (subordinate race or races) the racial status quo” (Bonilla-Silva, 2003, p. 65). Thus, CDA posits that language can reproduce unequal power dynamics and seemingly suggests that the development of the statements we examined were guided by each leaders’ personal beliefs and ideologies. Finally, hegemony refers to one social group’s dominance (dominant group) over another social group (subordinate group), and may manifest as the dominant group’s interests aligning with the subordinate group’s interests when the interests are mutually beneficial. An example of this occurs in speeches and written statements when leaders use language like “we” and “us” to project ideals of *unity* and *equality* amongst leaders and their “subordinates” (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). Hypolite and Stewart (2019) suggested that leaders use this tactic to assert their legitimacy and authority as the voice of those within their organization.

Given that this study examined leaders' responses to issues of race and racism, the core concepts of CDA are also connected to critical race theory. Critical race theory (CRT) is an analytical framework which explains how social institutions within the United States are inherently racist and intend to maintain white supremacy (Crenshaw et al., 1995). There are several fundamental tenets of CRT, including the prevalence of racism, whiteness as property, interest convergence, intersectionality, racial ideology challenges, and commitments to social justice (Crenshaw et al., 1995). CRT provides a pragmatic perspective on race and racism, which reflects the past and present implications of race and racism in the lived experiences and problems of Black people and other people of color. CRT is the optimal framework for examining the collegiate athletic enterprise, wherein race and racism play a role in who is hired, recruited, and how they are treated throughout their time in the athletic organizations (Gayles et al., 2018; Hawkins, 2010). CRT is a critical component of an anti-racist epistemology within sports research and practice. Singer (2005) wrote that within sports scholarship, CRT can assist in “[identifying], [analyzing], and [changing] those structural and cultural aspects of sport that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of various sport organizations” (p. 471). Connected to the core concepts of CDA, we leaned on CRT in this study to understand how leaders identified and addressed issues related to race and racism in their public statements, as well as how racism and larger systems of power, privilege and domination are maintained or challenged in college sports discourse.

Method

This study was guided by critical discourse analysis (CDA) methodology. CDA describes language as a social practice that is tied to historical and social context. Thus, social relationships are reproduced, challenged, or uncontested through language and the words we select to describe our experiences and perspectives (Fairclough, 1992). In this study, we examined the relationships, expectations, and assumptions communicated through language choice and perceived interpretations of this language. As a methodology and analytical technique, CDA examines language within the social context in which it was produced and allows researchers to make perceptions about the meaning and intentions behind language choice. In this study, the social context was shaped by the murder of Floyd, which brought renewed attention to the

killings of other unarmed Black people, and subsequent uprisings against institutionalized racism across the country (Wolfson, 2020). The collegiate athletic enterprise also shaped the language examined in this study, as college sports, specifically at the Division I level, is often subject to criticism for the underrepresentation of Black coaches and staff (Cunningham, 2010) and the exploitation of Black student-athletes (Gayles et al., 2018).

Data Collection

The units of analysis in this study were published statements from college athletics leaders. To collect data, we identified statements that were published by Division I head coaches and athletic directors between the dates of May 26 and June 7, 2021. To do this, we performed Google searches using phrases such as “athletic directors response to George Floyd” and “coaches response to George Floyd.” In these searches we found either direct links to published statements or new articles that had provided commentary and/or aggregated athletic directors’ (AD) and head coaches’ (HCs) responses. The articles led us to actual statements that were published on university websites or Twitter accounts. We conducted our searches (two to three searches each) separately and created a document to share links/statements to ensure that we captured as many statements as we could find. Furthermore, similar studies have collected between 15-60 statements (Cole & Harper, 2016; Hypolite & Stewart, 2020; Jones, 2019; Morton et al., 2020). Thus, we strove to collect at least 50 statements. A total of 65 statements were collected, representing 40 different institutions.

Before data analysis, we chose to include all statements that met the criteria listed above, without reading the statements’ content, because we concluded, at the very least, leaders were compelled to share a statement because of the social and civil unrest they observed. We intentionally chose to include only statements from athletic directors, as they are considered the official spokesperson for their athletic departments and thus, speak on the departments’ behalf, and head coaches, as they are considered the official spokesperson for their teams and thus, speak on their teams’ behalf. ADs and head coaches hold the most power and influence within the current landscape of college sports, are the most visible leaders in college sports, and, in some states, the highest paid public officials (Thronton, 2021).

Furthermore, with team statements, it was unclear whether these were joint endeavors between the athletes and coaches or solely the work of student-athletes. Thus, we felt it best only to include the statements in which an AD or head coach was the sole signatory. See Table 1 for additional information about the sample.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was guided by Fairclough's (2015) model of CDA, which involves three analysis processes: textual analysis, processing analysis, and social analysis. Textual analysis involved describing the units of research, which were the written statements in response to the murder of Floyd. This analysis was completed when we determined that we would collect statements published by ADs and HCs on athletic department websites and Twitter accounts. Processing analysis involved interpreting the data and making assumptions based on the content. To begin this phase, the two of us made a list of pre-codes or topics we anticipated would arise as we analyzed data. For example, some pre-codes we noted were “naming”, “emotions” and “unity”. We then open-coded each statement individually and noted preliminary themes across

the statements. Finally, social analysis examined how socio-historical context shaped these statements' dissemination and content. After the first round of open coding and developing preliminary themes, we engaged in conversation to discuss the initial themes, the implications of the murder of Floyd, and the subsequent civil unrest, and collaboratively developed a set of guiding questions to inform another round of coding. Some guiding questions included: "Does the statement discuss racism?" and "Does the statement mention students and staff? If so, what does it say about these populations?"

Limitations

This study was not without limitations. Given how we collected data, there may be some Division I, football bowl subdivision (FBS) bias reflected in the data and, ultimately, the findings. Because Division I, FBS athletic programs are among the most visible in college sports, it is likely that our Google search results returned these institutions more frequently than non-FBS institutions. Furthermore, only 40 institutions are represented in the sample. There are 358 Division institutions (NCAA, 2021a), so our sample represents about 11% of the Division I. As such, it is important to note this study's findings may not be generalizable across Division universities that vary in size, visibility, and even location of those included in this study's sample.

Positionality

We come to this work as two scholars deeply invested in using our scholarship to create inclusive, anti-racist, and culturally affirming environments in college athletics and higher education. Author 1 began her career working in academic support for college athletes at multiple Division I institutions. As a practitioner, they observed how athletic administrators "tiptoed" around issues of race and racism, even when student-athletes named the racialized experiences they had in various academic and athletic spaces. Their interest in this research stemmed from this experience, mainly how leaders positioned themselves and their departments within a larger conversation about systemic oppression. Author 2 played Division I Volleyball for five years before transitioning into professional practice as a K-12 educator. From K-12 to higher education, they noticed a great deal of racism related to their lived experiences as a student-athlete. Even more so, Author 2 realized that advocating for social issues as a Black student-athlete often was coupled with persecution by the dominant white culture. Their interest in conjunction with their positionality influences their research on justice and equality for collegiate student-athletes.

Our personal and professional experiences within college athletics and higher education served as an impetus for engaging in this study. Our experiences and perspectives influenced how we developed our conceptual framework, how we analyzed the data and how we made sense of the findings and implications of this work. We hope that leaders in college athletics will leverage this study as they move from rhetoric in times of crisis to transformative action that create inclusive environments within their organization.

Table 1
Sample Information

Institution	Location of Publication	Author	Date
Baylor University	Twitter	Head Coach – Football	05/30/2020
Duke University	Twitter	Head Coach – Men’s Basketball	06/01/2020
Duke University	Twitter	Athletic Director	05/30/2020
Duke University	Twitter	Head Coach – Women’s Basketball	06/01/2020
Duke University	Twitter	Head Coach – Football	05/31/2020
George Washington University	Twitter	Head Coach – Men’s Basketball	05/30/2020
Indiana State University	Twitter	Athletic Director	05/31/2020
Kansas State University	Twitter	Athletic Director	05/29/2020
Michigan State University	Twitter	Head Coach – Football	05/29/2020
Mississippi State University	Twitter	Athletic Director	05/31/2020
Northeastern University	University Website	Athletic Director	06/04/2020
North Carolina State University	Twitter	Head Coach – Football	05/30/2020
North Carolina State University	Twitter	Head Coach – Men’s Basketball	05/30/2020
Oregon State University	Twitter	Head Coach – Football	05/30/2020
Oregon State University	Twitter	Head Coach – Men’s Basketball	05/31/2020
Pennsylvania State University	Twitter	Athletic Director	05/31/2020
Pennsylvania State University	Twitter	Head Coach – Football	05/31/2020
Purdue University	Twitter	Head Coach – Men’s Basketball	05/30/2020
Rutgers University	Twitter	Athletic Director	05/29/2020
San Diego State University	University Website	Athletic Director	06/01/2020
Stanford University	University Website	Athletic Director	06/01/2020
Texas Tech University	Twitter	Athletic Director	05/30/2020
Texas Tech University	Twitter	Head Coach – Football	05/29/2020
The Ohio State University	Twitter	Athletic Director	05/29/2020
The Ohio State University	Twitter	Head Coach – Men’s Basketball	05/29/2020
University of Alabama	Twitter	Head Coach - Football	05/31/2020
University of Alabama	Twitter	Athletic Director	05/31/2020

University of Arizona	Twitter	Head Coach – Football	05/31/2020
University of Arizona	Twitter	Head Coach - Women’s Basketball	05/31/2020
University of Arkansas	Twitter	Athletic Director	05/31/2020
University of Central Florida	Twitter	Head Coach – Men’s Basketball	06/01/2020
University of Georgia	Twitter	Head Coach – Football	05/30/2020
University of Iowa	Twitter	Head Coach - Football	06/02/2020
University of Iowa	Twitter	Head Coach – Men’s Basketball	06/01/2020
University of Kansas	University Website	Joint Statement – AD & Head Coaches	05/30/2020
University of Kansas	University Website	Head Coach – Football	05/30/2020
University of Kansas	University Website	Head Coach – Men’s Basketball	05/30/2020
University of Kentucky	Twitter	Head Coach – Football	06/05/2020
University of Maryland	Twitter	Athletic Director	06/01/2020
University of Maryland	Twitter	Head Coach – Basketball	06/01/2020
University of Maryland	Twitter	Head Coach – Football	05/30/2020
University of Michigan	Twitter	Head Coach – Men’s Basketball	06/01/2020
University of Minnesota	Twitter	Athletic Director	06/01/2020
University of Minnesota	Twitter	Head Coach – Football	05/29/2020
University of Mississippi	Twitter	Athletic Director	05/31/2020
University of Missouri	Twitter	Head Coach – Men’s Basketball	05/31/2020
University of Nebraska	Twitter	Head Coach – Football	06/01/2020
University of North Carolina	Twitter	Athletic Director	06/01/2020
University of North Carolina	Twitter	Head Coach – Men’s Basketball	05/31/2020
University of North Texas	Twitter	Athletic Director	05/31/2020
University of North Texas	Twitter	Head Coach - Football	05/31/2020
University of Notre Dame	Twitter	Head Coach – Women’s Soccer	06/01/2020
University of Notre Dame	Twitter	Head Coach – Women’s Basketball	05/31/2020
University of Notre Dame	Twitter	Head Coach – Football	05/30/2020
University of Oregon	Twitter	Athletic Director	05/29/2020
University of Oregon	Twitter	Head Coach – Football	05/29/2020
University of Southern California	Twitter	Athletic Director	05/31/2020

University of Tennessee	University Website	Joint Statement – AD & Head Coaches	05/31/2020
University of Texas	Twitter	Head Coach – Football	05/29/2020
University of Wisconsin	Twitter	Head Coach – Football	06/01/2020
University of Wisconsin	Twitter	Athletic Director	05/29/2020
University of Wyoming	Twitter	Athletic Director	05/31/2020
University of Wyoming	Twitter	Head Coach – Men’s Basketball	06/01/2020
West Virginia University	Twitter	Head Coach – Men’s Basketball	06/01/2020

Findings

After reviewing the 65 statements collected, four themes emerged related to the perceived purpose and function of the language used in these statements: describing what happened, naming, and acknowledging emotions, calls for unity and humanity, and calls for action and social responsibility. Below we discuss each theme and provide examples from the published statements.

Theme #1: Describing What Happened

In response to our first research question, theme #1 captured how leaders described the events and the populations directly affected and harmed by them. As they wrote about the events that took the lives of Floyd and others, leaders used melancholy terms such as “recent tragedies,” “horrific death,” “senseless deaths,” and “unnecessary loss” to describe what took place. Statements like “what happened to George Floyd” and “I’ve watched the events across our country over the last few days” were commonly used to reference Floyd and others. While these terms captured the outcomes of Floyd’s and others’ interactions with the police, they described them in ways that did not place blame on either Floyd or the police. Other statements explained the events in relation to morality, justice, and criminality. The football coach from the University of Texas described the “killing” of Floyd as a “reprehensible crime,” while the women’s basketball coach from the University of Notre Dame defined Floyd’s death as “murder” and the men’s basketball coach from Duke University described Floyd’s and others’ deaths as “recent acts of injustice in our country.” Each of these statements implies the belief that these acts were unjust and/or criminal.

The aforementioned statements fall midrange on a spectrum that defined how leaders either explicitly referenced the events, described the circumstances in vague terms, or not at all. On the explicit end, leaders described Floyd’s and others’ deaths as part of the reoccurring mistreatment of Black people and other people of color in the United States. For example, certain leaders acknowledged the frequency of the circumstances that led to Floyd’s and others’ deaths. A joint statement from the University of Kansas described this as “recent acts of racial divide and violence.” In contrast, another from an institution in the Southeast referred to it as “heightened occurrences of racial, social injustice.” Both examples acknowledge the implications of race in the deaths of Floyd and others. Other leaders specifically mentioned violence against

Black people. For example, the men's basketball coach from The Ohio State University described this as the “senseless violence to unarmed and defenseless black men,” while the men's basketball coach from the University of Central Florida wrote, “George Floyd's murder comes on the heels of the vicious and senseless murders of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor after years of increased exposure of police violence against the black community.” Both examples demonstrate an awareness of how police violence has been especially harmful and damaging to Black lives and communities.

Finally, some leaders described the deaths of Floyd and others in the context of the *-isms* that inform how Black people and other people of color are treated in the United States. The women's basketball coach from the University of Notre Dame explained, “another target, another hashtag and a continued system of oppression that has plagued our country for hundreds of years. Blatant racism, police brutality, and murder targeting black and brown people.” Similarly, the men's basketball coach from the University of Missouri described this as “violence toward people of color, the hate, the racism, the systemic oppression.” These statements inferred that a more significant system of racial dominance and subordination was at play, informing the increased disposability and violence against Black people and other people of color. These statements, as mentioned above, stand in complete contrast to those in which leaders either vaguely reference the events surrounding Floyd's and others' deaths or did not reference them at all. The vague statements ranged from the men's basketball coach from North Carolina State University who said, “I've watched and witnessed the events of the past few days” to the football coach from Baylor University who made no mention of Floyd, his murder, or the events that followed, but said, “from my heart, let me say that we must become uncomfortable for the sake of humanity and progress.”

Theme #2: Naming and Acknowledging Emotions

In response to our first and second research questions, theme #2 highlighted aspects of the overall message and sentiments of the statements. Appealing and acknowledging the emotions of themselves, their student-athletes and staff, and the families of Floyd and others, was a central theme across the statements athletic leaders wrote. First and foremost, several leaders extended condolences to the families of Floyd and others in their statements, offering phrases such as “my deepest condolences to the Floyd family,” “my heart goes out to George Floyd and his family,” and “I grieve for the mothers and families of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Mike Brown, Sandra Bland, and the list goes on and on.” Additionally, leaders used words and statements such as “heartbroken,” “disappointed,” “horrific,” “frustrated,” and “gut-wrenching” to capture their emotions as they discussed these events. As they acknowledged the feelings of their Black students and staff, leaders made statements such as this one from the athletic director from Kansas State University: “We are one family and emphasize our support for our Black student-athletes during a challenging time,” while the football coach from the University of Nebraska said, “I am hurting for the Black community and the Black members of our team and our coaching staff.” In these statements, the leaders acknowledge that their Black students and staff may have been affected by the deaths of Floyd and others in a manner that non-Black students and staff were not.

These statements also captured how leaders used their proximity and/or personal connections to the Black community and the mistreatment of Black people to grasp how they were affected by the deaths. For example, multiple non-Black leaders referenced their

relationships with Black students. The football coach from Texas Tech University explained, “through our great game of football, I've played with and coached many African American men. While I do not pretend to have walked in their shoes or understand how they feel, I do listen....” The football coach from Duke University wrote:

I have developed many great relationships with young men over 45 years of coaching football. Obviously many are African American men... These many years have proven to me that racism has continued to be a broad problem in our society and a part of that problem has been far too many young black men being mistreated, and yes, killed by some police officers.

These quotes capture non-Black leaders using a personal connection to Black people to make sense of how they are personally affected by the harm of institutionalized racism.

Additionally, several non-Black leaders acknowledged that their racial background gave them a limited understanding of how their Black students and staff may have been feeling. The football coach from the University of Iowa explained, “I am a white football coach. I cannot begin to imagine what it is like to be pulled over for driving while Black or to have people cross the street because they don't want to walk alongside you. But some of your coaches have shared that experience”, while the football coach from the University of Georgia wrote, “I realize that I feel this differently, but I am hurting for the young black men on my team, I am hurting for the black men on our staff. I cannot imagine the agony, grief, and fear that our black communities feel today and every other day.” In these quotes, leaders acknowledge that they cannot relate to certain racialized experiences, while also recognizing that race, and possibly racism, affect their Black constituents in a unique way.

Multiple Black leaders shared either personal stories or concerns for their lives, their families, and their students in their responses. The women's basketball coach from the University of Notre Dame said, “I am not only a coach and leader, but I am a mother. A mother of a young black man. It is a constant fear of mine to have a son that the world views as a threat. I wake up asking God to protect him,” while the football coach from University of Arizona said, “being a college head football coach...does not make me immune to the same suspicious stares, to the same fears of being pulled over, to the same assumptions that others make of me, to the same racist remarks sent in my direction, simply because I am Black.” These examples capture how non-Black and Black leaders evoked their personal and professional backgrounds to appeal to the emotions of their audiences and describe how their lives were personally affected by the deaths of Floyd and others.

Theme #3: Calls for Unity and Humanity

In response to our third research question, theme #3 discussed how many leaders called for unity and humanity amongst the athletic and university communities and broader society. Several leaders spoke of the need to unify or come together as a means of healing and action. Common phrases included “we will do this together” and “we are one family.” In some cases, leaders evoked the unifying aspects of playing sports to demonstrate the power of unity. For example, the athletic director from the University of Wisconsin wrote, “We all must work together to correct and reshape this reality. What makes sports so great is their ability to bring together people from different backgrounds for a common cause, even if we disagree on so many

other things.” Similarly, several leaders leaned on institutional and organizational mission, values, and priorities to demonstrate a commitment to unity through diversity and inclusion. For example, the athletic director from the University of Southern California wrote, “it’s important to remind ourselves and each other of the guiding principles and values that unite us. I want to emphasize that our department of athletics is wholly committed to fostering a community that embraces diversity and is inclusive of individuals from all backgrounds and identities.” These examples demonstrate how leaders sought to draw on sport and institutional values to imply that unity, diversity, and inclusion are inherent values and priorities within their departments and teams.

Leaders also discussed unity in terms of respecting and showing humanity towards one another, regardless of differences in identity. Several leaders used words like “compassion,” “support,” and “respect” to convey the need for coming together. Leaders talked about how diversity and respect across differences provided a unique learning experience for student-athletes. For example, the athletic director from Kansas State University said, “the K-State family consists of individuals with a vast range of experiences, beliefs, values, intellectual capabilities and cultural views, respect for these unique characteristics allows for our student-athletes to achieve their full potential while enjoying the benefits of a rich learning environment.” In addition to the benefits of respect and diversity in college learning environments, the football coach from Pennsylvania State University discussed this in the context of being a good citizen, saying, “we are a country of opportunity, a nation of ambition and a people rooted in diversity, shared experiences and hope. It’s more critical now than ever; we recognize our differences should not divide us but truly strengthen the fabric of who we are!”

Additionally, leaders used quotes and Biblical references to emphasize the significance of unity, healing, and change. Some leaders drew on the words of activists and political leaders in their response, as the football coach from Michigan State University did when he evoked the words of Martin Luther King, Jr.: “Never, never be afraid to do what’s right, especially if the well-being of a person or animal is at stake. Society’s punishments are small compared to the wounds we inflict on our soul when we look the other way.” Other leaders evoked religion to bolster their calls for unity and peace. Common phrases included “pray for love instead of anger and equality instead of injustice” and “I pray for you to find peace”; statements that called on religious forces to ask for love and peace across society. Furthermore, some leaders referenced Bible verses in their statements. The men’s basketball coach from Texas Tech University said, “I do know one thing to be an answer – John 15:12. Jesus says, “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.” These examples capture how leaders called on forces larger than themselves as they hoped for unity, peace, and love following the murder of Floyd.

Theme# 4: Calls for Action and Social Responsibility

Finally, theme #4 addressed our third question and captured how several leaders addressed who is responsible for pursuing social change and how social change would take place. Leaders discussed this in two distinct ways: (1) by acknowledging personal responsibility and naming the responsibility of others and (2) by implicitly and explicitly discussing actions they would take or were already taking to increase awareness and pursue justice within their organizations. For example, the women's soccer coach from the University of Notre Dame wrote, “this is a time for me to listen, learn, and act with empathy. It's also a time for me to challenge anyone who looks like me as a coach, leader, or teacher to do the same.” Similarly, the women’s

basketball coach from the University of Arizona said, “it is my duty to unite, empower, and educate women to have an effective voice to inspire change.” In both examples, leaders acknowledge their personal responsibility as well as their responsibility as an educator of young adults. In contrast, the men’s basketball coach from the University of Missouri said, “while I’m on this earth, my voice won’t be silent until the injustice stops. It goes beyond a post on social media. It’s time to join together in our pain, to mourn, to stand united against oppression and ACT to create change.” Although each of these statements does not outline actionable, specific steps that these coaches plan to take, they do describe the coaches’ desire to be more aware, socially conscious, and active in some way.

Other leaders discussed the ongoing conversations they were having with their student-athletes and their sense of responsibility to them, such as the athletic director from Stanford University:

I engaged in a thoughtful, powerful and candid conversation with several of our student-athletes, many of them Black, who sought leadership and a listening ear – not necessarily the answers... I have a responsibility to them, to my two daughters, to my wife, to the black community, and to our society to do my part.

In addition to acknowledging personal responsibility, several leaders discussed what the athletic director from Duke University described as “collective responsibility.” Common phrases included “we must do better,” “it’s going to take everyone,” “it is everyone’s responsibility” and “it’s on all of us to create change and do the right thing.” While leaders did not outline explicit steps or solutions, they called for others to do their part and, potentially, acknowledge that sustainable societal and organizational change is genuinely only possible when there is buy-in from the masses.

Furthermore, many leaders made broad calls to action to their constituents and named ongoing and/or proposed initiatives implemented within their teams and departments. Regarding these calls to action, many leaders called for their constituents to be better listeners, try to be more understanding of others’ experiences, and “no longer tolerate racism and social injustice in our country,” as the men’s basketball coach at Duke University said. Leaders referenced having discussions, open forums, and conversations within their organizations to discuss social issues, such as the men’s basketball coach from The Ohio State University, who said, “as we have the last few years in our locker room, we will continue to listen to each other and have healthy conversations around race... few topics are as relevant to our team as this one.” In addition to mentioning beginning or continuing conversations about race and social justice, leaders also discussed specific collaborations and ongoing initiatives that were taking place in their organization. For example, the athletic director from the University of Wisconsin explained that the leadership in their department would collaborate with their minority student-athlete organization saying, “this is an ongoing journey, and we will continue to evaluate our own policies and practices to ensure a safe and memorable experience is had by all.” The athletic director from the University of Oregon said, “We started BEOREGON to promote diversity and inclusion and to provide an opportunity for everyone to excel as their authentic selves. There is much work to be done ahead of us, but we will do our part to make our society a better place for all”, while the athletic director at Northeastern University listed several “action items,” amongst those included, “ensure that Black student-athletes have appropriate role models and mentors within the Northeastern Athletics community.” While the latter example alluded to future

intentionality in hiring practices, all of them discussed shifts in how issues of diversity and inclusion will be addressed within departments and/or teams.

Discussion

Using CDA, this study demonstrated that even though athletic leaders felt it was important to publicly address the murder of George Floyd, the willingness to explicitly name institutionalized racism and acknowledge how this racism affects Black people and other people of color is variable and not the norm. This is particularly important considering that college sports are constantly under fire for perpetuating racism (Bimper & Harrison, 2015; Gayles et al., 2018). We found that when some leaders used discourse that attempted to capture larger systems of power and domination, they reinforced these systems in several distinct ways. This section will discuss how this happened, explore them using components of our conceptual framework, and discuss how this study contributes to existing literature.

As described in Theme #1, Describing What Happened, how leaders acknowledged the deaths of Floyd and Taylor ranged from very specific, even visceral descriptions of the deaths to vague mentions or no mention at all. While many leaders did acknowledge and name what took place, the absence of such discourse from certain leaders represents an erasure of the harmful and systemic damage that the murder perpetuated. These discursive actions engage with the discourse and ideology concepts of CDA. Leaders' discursive decisions to either use descriptive, vague, or no language to describe the murder are likely shaped by their worldview, perceptions of the murder, and the events leading up to them. Furthermore, some leaders' discursive decision to refer to the murder in the context of the *-isms* experienced by racially marginalized people likely reflect each leaders' ideology related to the presence of systemic oppression, institutionalized racism, and police brutality in society.

Furthermore, this study's findings align with prior studies such as Hypolite & Stewart (2019) and Morton et al. (2020) in that many leader's calls for unity and action were devoid of commitments for change beyond having conversations and promising to be a part of "the change." We believe that while calls for unity and use of terms such as "we" and "us" are intended to project ideals of *unity* and *equality* amongst leaders and their "subordinates" (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000), they are a means of leaders asserting their legitimacy and authority as the "voice" of those within their organization (Hypolite & Stewart, 2019). This is particularly evident in Theme #3, Calls for Unity and Humanity, and Theme #4, Calls for Action and Social Responsibility. Furthermore, while acknowledging that Black students and staff were particularly affected by these deaths and offering sympathies, athletic leaders fell short of acknowledging how Black students and staff are harmed and exploited on playing fields and in their athletic departments. This is particularly troubling as there is an abundance of literature that captures the exploitation of Black athletes (Beamon, 2008; Gayles et al., 2018; Hawkins, 2010) and the underrepresentation and mistreatment of Black staff within athletic workspaces (Howe & Rockhill, 2020; Kelly et al., 2015; Price et al., 2017). While leaders described how Floyd and others lost their lives, many of them failed to acknowledge the role of race and/or the responsibility of the police in many of these deaths, thus ignoring the law enforcement systems in which police continue to harm and terrorize Black people, and justice systems that repeatedly fail to hold those responsible for the harm they cause.

Through the lens of CDA, leaders' privilege to name the murder of Floyd in ways that feel *safe* or *comfortable* for them, as well as the use of terms such as "we" and "us" throughout

certain statements, reflect hegemonic discourses that are “inherently tied to power differences between those who created them and those who are supposed to simply absorb and abide by their sentiments” (Hypolite & Stewart, p. 8). Such discursive actions reflect the leaders’ authority as the voice of their department and/or team, as well as evoke the CRT tenet of interest convergence. Bell (1992) described interest convergence as the instances when social justice victories occur only when the interests of the dominant group and the subordinate group align or when it either directly or indirectly serves the interests of the dominant social group, rather than to address the inequities that subordinate social groups face. In this case, the interests of Black student-athletes and staff who have engaged in activism in the past and been silenced by athletic leadership (Boggs, 2017; Riley, 2017) converged with the interests of predominantly white athletic directors and head coaches who used this discursive opportunity to disassociate themselves from institutionalized racism.

Additionally, in Theme #2, Naming and Acknowledging Emotions, while leaders attempted to capture and appeal to the emotions of their students, staff, and the victims’ families, prior literature suggests that these emotional appeals are a form of discursive manipulation (Hypolite & Stewart, 2019; Van Dijk, 2006). In this study, some leaders’ offered words that suggested the entire campus community was affected by the murder of Floyd in the same way, rather than explicitly acknowledging the feelings of or offering support to their Black students and staff. For example, it is the difference between the University of Minnesota AD saying, “[Student-athletes] are hurting over the indefensible killing of Mr. Floyd,” or University of Maryland men’s basketball coach saying, “I want to express my condolences to all affected” versus the University of Nebraska’s football coach saying: “I am hurting for the Black community and the Black members of our team and our coaching staff.” Through the lens of CRT, some leaders are possibly engaging in interest convergence. Because these statements are symbolic, many leaders use discourse meant to offer sympathies to project an understanding of the harm and violence Black people and other people of color face regularly, instead of explicitly acknowledging Black people and/or experiences and feelings.

Finally, this study builds on prior literature in several ways. In contrast to Cole & Harper’s (2017) and Jones’ (2019) studies, many leaders did not shy away from explicitly naming racism, or implicitly mentioning the patterns of state-sanctioned violence against Black people and communities, in the form of police brutality. This demonstrates that some leaders within college sports held a degree of social consciousness to recognize the racial subordination of Black people and other people of color. However, like Garcia et al.’s (2020) study, other leaders relied on reiterating espoused values. These leaders made broad calls for change, rather than explicitly telling their audiences how they would create more anti-racist, inclusive, and equitable environments on their teams, in their athletic departments, on their campuses, and beyond.

Scholars have labeled such public statements as performative (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). The problem with performative actions, such as releasing public statements after racially divisive incidents, is that these actions are used to appear as though social injustice is a priority within the organization when the practices and policies within the organization do not reflect this espoused value. Furthermore, such performative actions may superficially position leaders as personally invested and engaged in social justice work alongside and in service of marginalized communities (Eskrine & Bilimoria, 2019; Spanierman & Smith, 2017). Eskrine and Bilimoria (2019) wrote that these performative actions are “driven by the need for validation and [leaders] may intellectually understand the issues at hand, yet not sacrifice their personal or professional

capital to challenge or transform systems that they benefit from, even unwittingly” (p. 329). We build on this statement and argue that leaders in college sports engage in performative actions when they publicly denounce social injustice and acts of violence and harm against historically marginalized people, but fail to engage in social justice work, or acknowledge how they are complicit in systems that perpetuate social injustice. College athletics leaders must move beyond performative actions and do the work to practice what they preach. CDA helps us understand how leaders can make such statements and sustain hegemonic order by sustaining a racial capitalist enterprise that continues to exploit the labor of Black people.

Implications for Practice and Research

When instances of racial controversy and unrest occur, many higher education leaders choose to address them from an angle of crisis management, thereby prioritizing their public image over their students' psychological health and well-being (Watt, 2015). As such, a sense of urgency to release some public denouncement of racism may likely take priority over addressing issues of systemic racism on their campus and beyond, or developing actionable programming and initiatives that allow students the opportunity to engage in multicultural, anti-racist education.

As illuminated in this study, while leaders were willing to acknowledge, denounce and call for action against social injustice in their public statements, few leaders leveraged this discursive opportunity to outline explicit, actionable steps they were taking to engage in the necessary work toward social justice within their organization. Additionally, leaders must also be conscious of their audience when engaging with these discursive spaces. As leaders within higher education, priority must be placed on supporting students, staff, and their needs. Thus, leaders must keep a pulse on their community's needs and concerns. As such, we commend those leaders who did discuss action in their statements. We suggest that all leaders avoid hastily releasing statements that center emotional appeals and/or general calls of change. Instead, leaders should take their time, engage in conversations with their staff and students, and craft statements that highlight how their department and/or teams are supporting students and staff during the challenging time, address their department and/or teams' short-term actions, goals, and priorities as it relates to social justice, and/or commit to sharing long-term goals related to social justice at a later date. As evidenced in Theme 4: Calls for Action and Social Responsibility, some leaders acknowledge that this work is collective. Thus, leaders should use these discursive spaces to outline this collective action. Building on some of the examples presented in the findings, leaders may discuss current and future initiatives and/or programming they plan to implement within their organization. Leaders may use this space to discuss what they plan to do around policies, practices, and procedures within their department that harm and disenfranchise Black and other athletes and staff of color.

In the years since the murder of George Floyd, we are curious about how the content of these public statements guided the development of programs and initiatives that addressed issues of social justice in college sports. Thus, future research should explore the growth and development of social justice programming within college athletic departments following the murder of Floyd. Such scholarship will illuminate whether the discursive strategies discussed in this study resulted in sustained, transformative action within Division I athletic departments.

Conclusion

As Hylton (2010) stated, “the conditions that need to be in place for effective anti-racism performance must be sufficient so that thought, commitment, and performance are synchronized to ensure that these initiatives do not perpetuate the status quo” (p. 351). Because sports are a microcosm of society (Frey & Eitzen, 1991), athletic departments and universities must push beyond the thoughts that informed the statements we analyzed, develop actionable commitments to social justice, and hold themselves accountable to performing in ways that are consistent with these commitments. We recognize that such change will not happen overnight. However, in response to the murder of George Floyd, athletes in the collegiate and professional ranks called attention to the racism that is inherent within sports (Williams, 2021). Thus, leaders can no longer ignore the systemic issues that have burdened the lives of marginalized communities both on and off the field.

The murder of George Floyd triggered social justice demonstrations in the middle of a global health pandemic that has claimed the lives of almost 5 million people worldwide (JHU, 2021). The untimely murder of Floyd resulted in a new wave of activism for student-athletes and increased expectations for leaders within college sports. Collegiate athletes reiterated their commitments to change and racial justice throughout the summer of 2020 (NCAA, 2021c), and if it is important to athletes, it should be important to their leaders. The murder of Floyd revitalized discussions about racism, police brutality, and the mistreatment of Black people by law enforcement. We must acknowledge that racism is still a genuine threat to creating inclusive athletic environments, and leaders must mitigate this threat. Although additional research must be done to explore the departmental actions that followed the release of these statements, these statements can be used to hold departments accountable for enacting the values they claimed to hold. These recommendations are significant for supporting Black student-athletes through current social moments of racial injustice and beyond. Leaders must push the limits of what sports can do for social change, especially when change is perceived as radical or challenges the status quo.

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