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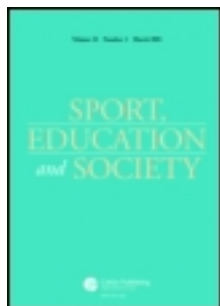
# African American Racial Identity and Sport

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# *African American Racial Identity and Sport*

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**ABSTRACT** *The purpose of this paper is to attempt to synthesize and apply African American racial identity theory and related research to the development of sport and physical activity patterns and preferences in African American youth. Historically the African American over-representation in particular sports phenomena has been examined genetically, anthropocentrically, physiologically, sociologically, and psychologically. The profusion of explanations is a testimony to the complexity of this phenomena. This manuscript provides yet another compelling perspective. Cross [(1995) The psychology of Nigrescence: revising the Cross Model, in: J.G. PONTEROTTO et al. (Eds) Handbook of Multicultural Counseling (Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage)] outlines the metamorphic process whereby African Americans 'become Black'. This is a developmental process in which African Americans develop a manner of thinking about and evaluating themselves in terms of being 'Black'. This paper examines the Cross model of African American racial identity development and gives theoretical implications for the development of sport and physical activity in African American youth.*

The topic of race is often ignored, glossed over, or diluted with other concepts such as multicultural issues or diversity. We know that racial opinions, feelings, and beliefs operate in both subtle and powerful ways even when there is no explicit intention. Unfortunately, racial discourse is curiously absent or under-discussed in the academic arena (Apple, 1999). In the academic domain where the quest for knowledge is at the center of our mission, the discourse on race is conspicuously absent. This topic is long overdue for frank, constructive, and productive discussion (Carter & Goodwin, 1994).

The study of race as a biological or genetic variable, especially with regard to sport, has a historically inauspicious and questionable reputation (Wiggins, 1997). Genetically speaking, the boundary lines drawn between races have been profoundly blurred. In this country there are some classified as African American that have more features common to Europeans than Africans. The study of the genetic and biological basis for race has been deemed fruitless and is composed of 'lose and leaky' categories that defy logic and are inherently inconsistent (Dole, 1995). According to LaVeist (1996), race is a social rather than biological factor that reveals a common socio-political history. Being African American has more to do with shared experiences than shared genetic material. Recent works by Hoberman (1997) and Entine (2000) tend to reinforce biological determinism and cloud the empirical realities of how racism manipulates patterns of identity, sport, and social distinction.

Even though many recognize the complexity and meaning of assigning individuals to racial categories, it is still the most widely used method of classification. Hewstone *et al.* (1991) attest to the prevalence of race as a prominent organizing principal in memory categorization. Our inclination to categorize people in terms of race is influenced by our

social surroundings, culture, customs, beliefs, and political associations, which in turn guide our conceptions of ourselves as well as others (Haslam *et al.*, 1999). Racial ideology has been entrenched in hundreds of years of history and has a firm hold on the social and psychological composition of the United States. Racial classification may apply either externally, internally, or both, but once established, it is extremely resistant to change (Harris, 1997).

Being African American presupposes a myriad of connotations in the minds of both African Americans and non-African Americans alike. Consider all the adjectives that come to mind when this racial designation is considered. Whenever engaging in this psychological exercise with others, the terms athlete or sport often surface. While these general terms are employed, most acknowledge that a specific and narrow range of sports are alluded to which tend to have an over-representation of African American participants (e.g. basketball, football, track & field). The implication is that, in most cases, being African American denotes an identification, either directly or indirectly, with specific sport activities. Consequently, in many cases development of African American racial identity may be tied to the development of an identification with particular sports.

The objective of this paper is to examine the Cross model of African American racial identity development and examine parallels and theoretical implications in the development of sport competency and participation patterns. Knowledge in this realm may cultivate a better understanding of the sport and physical activity performance and participation patterns in the African American population.

### **African American Racial Identity Development**

Every person goes through a process of defining themselves in terms of personal and social importance and meaning attached to being a part of a particular racial group. The social construction of these groups tends to change over time, but in the United States there are important and significantly different experiences of people that vary by racial categorization (Tatum, 1997). The development of identity is a socialization process shaped by experiences with one's family, community, school, group and social affiliations. It undergoes trials and tests to serve to make the owner feel focused and stable by making life predictable (Cross, 1995). While change in the environment is tolerated and sometimes welcomed, a change in our identity can be disturbing and difficult.

Cross (1995) outlines the metamorphic process whereby African Americans 'become Black'. This developmental process in which African Americans develop a manner of thinking about and evaluating themselves in terms of being 'Black' is called Nigrescence (Cross, 1995; Helms, 1985). Cross depicts Nigrescence as a resocializing experience that steers one's preexisting racial identity from Eurocentric to Afrocentric. This comprehensive model of African American racial identity development provides a rational and logical structure which can be applied to the development of preferences for sport and physical activity participation to support the understanding of the relationship of racial identity development and sport. Additionally, Cross *et al.* (1991) cite the broad applicability of this model by alluding to the fact that several authors in different parts of the country were developing parallel models independently indicating that African American racial identity development was essentially the same across several regions of the United States. In fact, this model has even been applied with slight modifications to the people of South Africa (Hocoy, 1999).

Cross' (1995) revision of his original racial identity model includes refinements that better coincide with today's social forces. The original four-stage process was modified through review of research findings on racial identity development. It is important to note that Nigrescence is not a process that follows normal physical growth and development. It is a mechanism by which African Americans who are assimilated, deculturalized and in many cases miseducated develop into more Afrocentric people. The following are brief summaries of Cross' revised Nigrescence model with inclusion of examples that depict sport and physical activity as part of the Nigrescence process.

### *Stage 1: Pre-encounter*

The African American in the pre-encounter stage exhibits a racial attitude that ranges from race neutral to anti-Black. These individuals may not deny being physically of African American decent, but consider it to be insignificant in their life or in some cases, a negative trait. In this stage some see race as a problem or stigma. In extreme cases, some may espouse potent anti-Black attitudes and internalize negative stereotypes and attitudes that approach those of white racists. Those in this stage will rarely exhibit any pride in their race and tend to blame African Americans for their own racial problems. They are often miseducated and see no value in 'Black studies'. They often exaggerate and romanticize the talents and capacities of Whites while showing skepticism and apprehension about the abilities of African Americans in the same position. Their preferred sport and physical activity, if there be any, would likely focus on traditionally European American activities as they strive to shun any identification with African Americans. In the pre-encounter stage the individual would probably not embrace traditionally African American activities such as basketball. In this stage the individual is socialized to favor a Eurocentric cultural perspective. This participation in activities that encourages greater contact with European Americans tend to be preferred. This stage may be extended for some African American males who enjoy social success because of athletic talent. Our culture embraces African American athletes; thus young African Americans gifted with athletic ability may be shielded for some time from the experiences that potentially trigger the encounter stage.

### *Stage 2: Encounter*

This stage is usually identified by a series of incidents, episodes, or circumstances that erode or transform the individual's present outlook or world view. The individual must though personalize the encounter information in a way that changes the way the person sees the world and him/herself. The encounter nudges the individual outside his or her comfort zone and may cause them to be perplexed, apprehensive, or even depressed. Examples of encounter episodes are surprisingly common. In the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Haley (1964) notes the response of an European American teacher. When Malcolm told the teacher he aspired to be a lawyer, the teacher responded 'A lawyer—that's no realistic goal for a nigger' (p. 36). Even though he was an A student and president of his class, this teacher framed Malcolm's potential within the perceived confines of his race. This encounter obviously had a huge impact on Malcolm X. Even though blatant examples of racist attitudes may not be as common today, there are still many encounter-producing occurrences. Many African American athletes enjoy a large degree of social acceptance in predominantly European American settings. Often the cultural acceptance of the African American athlete is severely strained if the African American

athlete begins to date a European American female. Because of the often unspoken taboo against interracial dating, particularly in the South, there is a fertile setting for encounter episodes. Furthermore, encounters with law enforcement officers who are unaware of the African American athlete's status is common (Slansky, 1997) and also provides encounter opportunities.

In this stage the person may seek additional information and validation for their newly developing identity. This state may be accompanied by emotion, guilt, and anger that is generalized toward Whites. In this stage sport and physical activity choices may not be significantly effected. Even though significant changes are taking place in the individual's identity, there may be little outward manifestation.

### *Stage 3: Immersion–Emersion*

The immersion–emersion stage of Nigrescence is characterized by destruction of the previous identity while simultaneously constructing the new Afrocentric identity. There is a commitment to replace the old world view with a new one, but the new self is not clearly defined. Therefore, symbols and attitudes thought to represent the new self attract individuals in this stage. Symbols such styles of dress, hairstyles, involvement in particular organizations and political groups typify those in this stage. Individuals in immersion–emersion stage adopt a dichotomized world view where everything is simply Black or White. African American youth at this stage may also begin to segregate themselves by race. This self-segregation is not just an attempt to be 'Black'. It comes about through disengagement from European Americans who 'don't get it' and engagement with other African Americans who can more readily validate and identify with what the person is feeling (Tatum, 1997). This self-segregation is a form of support group that the African American individual cannot find elsewhere. They want to be with peers who know how to be 'Black'.

Participation in sports or physical activities that identify the individuals 'Blackness' are likely sought out in an effort to completely immerse themselves in 'Blackness'. Physical activities that identified as 'White' may be shunned even if the individual shows potential for outstanding performance in the sport or activity.

After immersing themselves into an almost totally Afrocentric attitude and posture, the individual emerges from this oversimplified ideological perspective to a more reflective and profound understanding of African American issues. The individual understands and views the immersion as a period of transformation and moves on to a deeper understanding of Nigrescence.

### *Stage 4: Internalization*

Internalization represents a sense of contentment with the self that calms the internal struggle of the previous stages. The militant and radical attitudes are transformed into thoughtful examination of oppression and racism. The individual is saturated with sincere connection to and love and acceptance of African American communities. Sports and physical activities are then viewed as a mode of exercise or recreation rather than a source of identity. Participation in a traditionally European American sport or activity may no longer elicit dissonance in the individual. Internalization accompanies a soothing of internal psychological stress and the re-construction of one's basic personality along with the intermeshing of one's Blackness with other role identities (e.g. spiritual, occupational).

*Stage 5: Internalization–Commitment*

The Nigrescence voyage ends for some with curtailment of activities or discontinuation of active involvement exclusively in African American activities. Some on this voyage begin to dedicate a substantial degree of time and effort forging this new world view into tangible efforts to further the cause of Blackness. Nigrescence theory suggests that this commitment to sincere involvement in activities that further causes that are of interest to the African American community is the only partition between the previous stage and this one. This commitment may include activities or actions that are not considered Afrocentric. For example, the individual may commit to remaining physically fit via any mode that is attractive and available rather than being overly concerned with the Afrocentricity of the mode. This can be observed in the increasing numbers of African Americans becoming involved in activities once considered 'White sports'.

The activation and consummation of the Nigrescence experience is not the same for all African Americans. In some highly unlikely situations the individual may never develop past the pre-encounter stage while others progress through all stages before reaching adulthood. Thomas and Speight (1999) indicate that African American parents' racial identity attitudes were related to racial socialization attitudes. That is, parents with pre-encounter, encounter, and immersion attitudes did not have strong racial socialization attitudes and thus tended not to have strong socializing effects on their children. African American parents with internalization attitudes had strong racial socialization attitudes and were more likely to socialize their children to have a positive racial identity. These African American parents overwhelmingly felt that racial socialization was important and necessary to prepare children for the reality of racism. Plummer (1995) indicates that African American adolescents from nurturing environments display primarily internalization attitudes. Plummer reiterates that African American adolescents in her study were prepared by their parents with the skills necessary to function in a predominantly European American environment. Plummer also cautions that because their views of society are so narrow and devoid of life experiences, their internalization attitudes may be premature and idealized rather than based on experience and thoughtful analysis. It is doubtful that today's African American adolescent begins Nigrescence development at the pre-encounter stage.

### **The Role of Stereotypes in Identity Development**

Sport and physical activity attitudes and choices may be closely linked to racial identity attitudes. Viewing a sport or physical activity as identity appropriate may strongly influence participation, practice and persistence in the sport or activity of choice. African American youth with immersion attitudes may consider basketball, football, and track and field as appropriate for participation while excluding participation in other activities deemed inappropriate. These attitudes may develop skills, interests, and competencies in a narrow range of activities to the exclusion of most others.

Stereotypes are defined as beliefs about the personal characteristics of a group. These beliefs are often overgeneralized and erroneous, but resistant to change (Meyer, 1993). Nevertheless, stereotypes significantly influence the way we view other groups as well as our own behavior. Stereotypes function to organize and simplify information, preserve important social values, maintain group beliefs, justify collective actions and sustain positive group distinctiveness (Oakes *et al.*, 1994). Stereotyping or social categorization

that operates in the self-concept precipitates self-stereotyping which changes individuals into psychological group members (Oakes *et al.*, 1994).

The process of self-stereotyping and producing psychological groups are meshed in the development of social identity. Social identity deals with the inclination to maintain an optimistic view of the self through identifying with or establishing favorable comparisons between one's own group and other groups (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990). This social identity derives from the knowledge of group membership and development of collective self-esteem. This is evident in the self-segregation of young African Americans, particularly in immersion stage. In African American culture, the overwhelming success of African American athletes in particular sports would conceivably prompt the development of elevated collective self-esteem and perpetuate positive self-stereotypes in the realm of sport (Harrison, 2001). Biernat *et al.* (1996) suggest that the process of self-stereotyping is selective. They argue that those operating within the stereotyped group have immersed themselves in the group identity and display protective behavior with regard to their collective self-esteem. This again is clearly evident in the self-segregating behavior of many African American youth in sport settings. Goodstein and Ponterotto (1997) indicate that racial identity and self-esteem are significantly correlated for African Americans, but not for European Americans. In a society where being African American evokes so many negative stereotypes, it is easy to fathom why there would be fervent identification with a positive stereotype. The superior African American athlete stereotype has a unique history (Wiggins, 1997) that is pervasive among the general population. Stone *et al.* (1997) gave evidence of the ubiquitous perception of African American sport superiority in the general population. Given the same information and listening to a radio broadcast of a basketball game, the participants rated perceived African American athletes as having more athletic ability while perceived European American athletes were rated as having more basketball intelligence and hustle. There is also empirical evidence that suggests that the presence and salience of racial stereotypes can actually influence intellectual (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995) and athletic performance (Stone *et al.*, 1999). In light of the fact that stereotypes and self-stereotypes can form the basis of group identity, or in this case African American racial identity, it is tenable to say that developing skills in a particular sport may be intrinsic in the development of African American racial identity.

### **Racial Identity in Adolescence**

Awareness of racial differences is apparent in children as young as preschoolers (Ramsey, 1987). According to Ramsey, children, regardless of race, use race to categorize people more often than any other trait. Spencer and Markstrom-Adams (1990) indicate that in studies of preschool and elementary school-aged children there is an inclination towards a pro-European American bias in racial preference, attitudes, and identification. This indicates the realization of the preferences and privilege that accompany being European American. However, one's identity becomes crucial in adolescence. Adolescence is a time when one fervently seeks an identity. For African American children it is a time when the individuals define themselves as African American as part of the developmental process (Plummer, 1995). During this time the adolescent confirms preferences and beliefs consistent with his/her group affiliations. The adolescent begins to ask 'who am I ethnically and/or racially?' Race becomes salient to the adolescent mainly because his/her race becomes salient to the rest of the world (Tatum, 1997, p. 53). Those once



perceived as 'cute' children grow up and are often seen as threatening adolescents. This greatly increases the opportunity for encounter episodes.

African American adolescents tend to be more committed to a racial identity than European Americans (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). The meaning and significance of being African American becomes salient to the African Adolescent in many areas of life. For an African American adolescent it is virtually impossible to be unaware of the implications one's racial designation imposes on one's life. Hatcher and Troyna (1993) contend that racism is a profound factor in the educational experiences of African American and European American children. Because of the abundance of negative stereotypes imposed on African Americans, the influence of perceived positive racial stereotypes may have a refreshing influence on the development of the adolescent's racial identity. It may provide a comfortable place to 'immerse' one's self during identity development. As stated earlier, self-stereotyping has a self-protective facet that embraces positive traits and rejects the negative. Of the few positive stereotypes of African Americans, sport performance is probably the most salient. Thus other than entertainment, African American adolescents have few positive images on which to anchor their racial identity.

Goodstein and Ponterotto (1997) indicate that unlike European Americans, for African Americans, an elevated degree of racial identity indicates increased self-esteem. In a society in which both blatant and subliminal messages communicate negative images of African Americans, African American adolescents can find positive images in few domains. One of the few areas where African Americans are depicted positively is sport. African American athletes are highly visible and occupy a lofty status in the eyes of American society, while in the mainstream of American society African Americans are rendered virtually invisible. In an attempt to cope with the alienation and frustration some African American athletes channel their creative energies into the creation of distinctive and demonstrative sport skills, styles of demeanor, language, gestures, gait patterns, and the like (Majors, 1990). When these behaviors are observed by African American adolescents who are engaged in a search for identity, and those observed are rewarded and admired for their actions, the behaviors are easily incorporated in the individual's identity and become a convenient place for immersion. Many of these young people are heavily exposed to the prevalent stereotypes about African Americans particularly in the realm of sport. In an effort to form a positive racial identity it is plausible to think they would adhere to and identify with what they perceive as positive stereotypical views of African Americans of which one of the most prominent is the African American athlete. It is easy to understand why African American adolescents, many of whom may be in immersion stage, would adopt the hairstyles, demeanor, and sport choices of those they perceive to be African American role models.

During adolescence young people are exposed to ideas and values outside of those taught and established in the family. They move from a strong family influenced setting to a peer dominated domain. Parents and other significant authority figures gradually lose their persuasive power while the need for peer approval escalates (Payne & Isaacs, 1999, pp. 51-52). For males, especially African American males, involvement in sport and athletic ability are powerful determinants of social acceptability and group membership. According to Payne and Isaacs, sport and physical activity involvement not only determine group membership, but sport skills are molded and pressure is exerted to improve skills in the accepted activities to gain respect and approval. All this occurs at a time when young people are growing rapidly in size and strength, the requisite parameters for exceptional sport performance. These young people, particularly those in

immersion stage, are not only developing an identity with their peer group, they are identifying with and immersing themselves in the sports and physical activities they are participating in.

For most youth this means identifying with and participating in activities that are popular with the peer group whose identification is likely with high status models. For African American youth this means participation in sports in which they see other successful African Americans participate (e.g. basketball, football, track & field). Harrison *et al.* (1999) demonstrated that African American adolescents physical activity choices were significantly different from and less eclectic than those of European American adolescents. These students identified overwhelmingly with the stereotypical African American activities such as basketball, football, and track. Additionally, when compared to others, African American males appear to be more positively affected by sport models. Further, the results of the study also showed that African Americans expected or aspired to participate at higher levels (e.g. collegiate, professional) than European American students. According to this study these choices were rooted in the development of the adolescent's self-schema. It is likely that these schemata, because they coincide with racial identity development, intensely influence sport and physical activity choices throughout life.

### **Interaction of Racial and Athletic Identity**

In the evolving study of African American racial identity one must consider the stableness of such a construct. Of what import is African American racial identity if it is malleable based on situational factors? Shelton and Sellars (2000) address this issue and conclude that African American racial identity has both situational and stable properties. These authors also ascertain that under conditions where race is an important factor, African American racial identity moves to the forefront.

But what happens when sport is considered an important part of one's identity? What happens when an African American develops a strong affinity and identity in the realm of sport? While some believe that it is racial identity that stimulates the development of athletic identity, what happens when the athletic identity moves to the forefront? Brewer *et al.* (1993) identify athletic identity as the degree to which an individual identifies with the athletic role. Brown *et al.* (1997) investigated the role of both racial and athletic identity among college athletes, and concluded that while racial identity and athletic identity were positively correlated in European American athletes, these constructs were negatively correlated in African American athletes. The authors suggest that while competing in intercollegiate athletics African American athletes are shielded from racism and discrimination, which allows their athletic identities to come to the forefront. Jackson *et al.* (1997) also found some support for the increasing importance of athletic identity and the decreasing importance of racial identity among African American athletes. In this emerging vein of research, much more work needs to be done involving valid and reliable measures of both racial and athletic identity before we really understand the interaction of these constructs.

### **Racial Identity: Crossing Economic Class Lines**

There are those that suggest that the differences observed in sport and physical activity participation patterns and performance can be attributed to differences in socio-economic status (SES) (Wilson, 1978). It has been postulated that people of lower income

have fewer options and opportunities for securing high status and lucrative employment. Professional sports provide one of the few ways this can be accomplished. Furthermore, it is speculated that sports like basketball are popular among poorer people because of the ease of accessibility to facilities. According to these hypotheses, African Americans are over-represented in particular sports because they are disproportionately represented in lower SES. While these theories appear logical, they also distort, dilute, oversimplify, and underestimate the meaning and impact of developing an African American identity in the realm of sport.

Several researchers and theorists give evidence that the significance of being African American and the development of African American racial identity cross SES lines (Pettigrew, 1980; Willie, 1989). In most cases African Americans feel they have more in common and more shared experiences with other African Americans than with European Americans of the same income level. African Americans share many common negative experiences that majority individuals rarely experience. These experiences leave enduring impressions on their minds and become entwined in and influence the development of the individual's racial identity. Experiences such as being detained by authorities on a DWB (driving while Black) occur frequently (Slansky, 1997) and are not confined to African Americans of low SES. In fact, African Americans of higher SES report high incidences of being stopped or arrested by police officers while shopping in upscale neighborhoods or driving expensive cars (*Jet*, 1993). African American motorists stopped on DWBs often experience harsher treatment and are detained longer than majority motorists. These negative experiences which evoke strong emotional responses are shared among many African Americans. As stated earlier, these kinds of incidents may provide the stimulus for movement into the encounter stage or send the African American youth deeper into immersion.

Durant and Sparrow (1997) found that regardless of their social class, African Americans in their study perceived that their opportunities were limited because of their race. Furthermore, it was revealed that African Americans in this study were more race conscious than class conscious. In fact middle class African Americans were even more race conscious than lower class African Americans. This indicates that regardless of social class, African Americans feel that race is still a profoundly important component in determining the opportunities and limitations on their lives. This seems to indicate that Nigescence is apparently a stronger factor than social class. What is blatantly obvious to African American youth is the over-representation of successful African American athletes in spite of the apparent limitations in other spheres.

This often unspoken consciousness helps explain why many African American youth, regardless of SES, place a tremendous emphasis on and identity with athletic achievement. It is one of the few venues in American life where the possibilities of success appear limitless. Although many African American youths have scores of potential role models in their schools, churches, homes, or communities, they understand that no matter how much schooling or education they acquire, they will still confront frequent episodes of racism in mainstream America. These episodes appear with less frequency in sport participation.

### **African American Masculinity, Popular Culture and Sport: Effects of Nigescence**

Harrison *et al.* (1999) findings indicate African American adolescents' physical activity choices were significantly different from and less eclectic than those of European

American adolescents. What is implicit in these findings is the possible transference of this athletic and racial schematic identity into broader societal occupational structures. In other words, if identities are narrow and monolithic for African American youth (particularly males) inside the vacuum of sport, then how might these same perceptions reflect their outside sport or occupational choices? How does it impact the Nigrescence process, or how is it impacted by the Nigrescence process?

There is some evidence that limited media exposure of African American youth manipulates choices of identity for African American males. Johnson *et al.* (1995) found that when compared to a control group, subjects in a rap video exposure condition were more likely to say that they wanted to be like the materialistic young man and were less confident that another young man, who chose to engage in academic pursuits, would achieve his educational goals. Clearly, a link exists between sport and entertainment as the attainable images of success to African American youth. The findings of this study also indicate that exposure to violent rap music videos has an effect on the attitudes and perceptions of young African American males. While not specifically tested in their study, it is logical to hypothesize that the bombardment of African American youth with images of African American athletes in a few sports can alter, confound, and shape the racial identity development of these young minds, especially when entering or going through immersion stage. The perceptions of the African American youth in this study indicate a negative effect regarding educational goals. African American adolescents in immersion stage may view academic attainment as 'acting White' (Ogbu, 1990) and instead channel their energies into sport and entertainment endeavors. This relates to African American youth focusing on particular sports as a means of achieving success. The antithesis to this question is to consider whether African American youth, particularly males, have negative perceptions of occupational aspirations outside sport. How do these perceptions influence or impact the individual in later identity development stages? Scholar Cornel West (1993), in his essay, articulates that African American males have different forms of expression in terms of navigating oppression, racism, and patriarchal power structures. Thus, many African American males channel their efforts towards sports and entertainment because this is the one vessel and space that offers them stylistic options. Others suggest the context of expression, African American masculinity, and space are critical when examining African American men, either empirically or exploratory (Majors, 1990; Spraggins, 1999; White & Cones, 1999). The challenge in the twenty-first century is not to exclude African American male confidence and expression by channeling them away from sport. The real challenge is to discover how to socialize this ethnic gender to invest in education with the same enthusiasm, work ethic and creative/artistic expression that they do on the playing fields and gyms (Harrison *et al.*, 2000). Perhaps a better understanding of the Nigrescence process will aid in meeting the challenge. Another challenge is to persuade European Americans to embrace and support African American racial development identity with the same level of acceptance given to athletic competency. Much more investigation is necessary to understand the perceptions of young African American male youth and how the image of African American professional athletes and entertainers accessing the mainstream economic structures without the status quo (suit and tie versus hip hop) attire and behaviors correlate, influence, and affect their daily investment in rigorous learning and scholarship for the delayed gratification of occupational and vocational success.

The emergence of the hip-hop athlete in the mid-1990s has further elevated the status of the African American athlete in American culture, and African American youth have taken notice. African American youngsters in crucial spates of racial identity develop-

ment observe today's superstar athletes, such as Allen Iverson, and profess a desire to emulate him. This is not surprising when one considers that Iverson's athletic ability has enabled him to play by his own rules, a rarity for an African American man in America. For instance, Iverson pays homage to the hip-hop African American culture by openly sporting braids and tattoos. He openly defies European American authority by coming to practices and games late (sometimes missing practice). He routinely travels with a roughish-looking entourage, and recently released a profanity-laden rap CD. This behavior would be unacceptable in nearly any other work environment. Nonetheless, because he is a gifted athlete he makes in excess of \$10 million dollars a year in salary and endorsements. What is the effect on young African Americans struggling with identity?

Many African American youth see themselves as the next potential Allen Iverson largely because there were very few perceived external obstacles placed in his path to stardom. They learn at an early age that America views an educated African American as threatening, while this same community will embrace, support, and encourage them in their athletic pursuits. Unless these perceived barriers are removed athletics will continue to occupy a central place in the African American community simply because it is one of the few places where an African American man can be a man.

### **Conclusions**

Nigresence theory appears to provide a credible framework for the discussion of African American racial identity and its relationship to sport. Cross' model of African American racial identity development appears to provide additional evidence to corroborate many of the sociological theories that attempt to explain the over-representation of African Americans in particular sports and physical activities. The Cross model provides a stable theoretical framework on which future research maybe anchored. More research is needed to shed light on the relationship of African American racial identity development and development of other identities in other domains such as athletic identity. Deeper understanding of these phenomena may help to stifle the oppressive funneling of the limitless dreams of African American youth into an extremely limited pool of athletic opportunities.

Understanding the development of African American racial identity and characteristics of its various stages can also be an invaluable tool for the teachers and other professionals working in diverse environments with African American youth. Because the world is becoming more diverse it is becoming more and more imperative that those in leadership positions understand all of the people they serve. This would indicate that all those who prepare teachers, coaches and others who will occupy leadership positions have a better understanding of racial identity development. Often racial problems stem from a lack of understanding and communication. Understanding racial identity development may provide the stimulation necessary to avert these problems.

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