EXPLORING THE NOTION OF INDIVIDUAL SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (ISR) AMONG BLACK MALE COLLEGE FOOTBALL ATHLETES

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Black male athletes are prominent figures in sport and society; and, as such, they are often subjected to the pressure of acting in a socially responsible manner. Given the predominance of Black males in American college athletics, it is important to examine their roles in society both on and off the field of play. Building upon of Agyemang and Singer's (2013) study on the individual social responsibility (ISR) of Black male professional athletes, the purpose of this study was to explore the concept of ISR among Black male college athletes. In this study, we engaged in semi-structured interviews with Black male football athletes in efforts to garner a baseline understanding of how they perceive their social responsibility as notable members of society. Initial findings suggest notions of being a role model, engaging in ethical behavior, and overcoming marginalization, mainly in regard to issues of race. Implications for future research are discussed.

Post the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and the desegregation of public school systems in the United States (U.S.) during the Civil Rights Movement era, Black students have been able to attend historically White institutions of higher education (HWIHE) with White students and compete on the same athletic teams. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and intercollegiate athletic programs, specifically college basketball and football programs at HWIHE, have evolved into some of the most lucrative American sport enterprises in the aftermath of desegregation with Bowl season in college football and Men's and Women's March Madness generating hundreds of

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[1] This research was completed prior to the conglomerate of athletes who participated in using their platform to protest for social change following former San Francisco 49ers Quarterback Colin Kaepernick's decision to take a knee during the playing of the U.S.A. National Anthem at National Football League (NFL) games during the 2016 season.

millions of dollars yearly and television broadcasting companies signing multi-billion-dollar contracts to televise the popular sports events (Martin, Fasching-Varner, & Hartlep, 2017; Smith, 1990; Zimbalist, 1999). Scholars have suggested it is the predominance of Black male athletes, who constitute 58.4% of the football and men's basketball players at colleges and universities in the six major NCAA Division I sports conferences while only representing 2.8% of full-time undergraduate students (Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013), that has largely contributed to the commercial success and high profile status of college sport at HWIHE in the U.S. (Harris, 2000; Singer, 2013). In this regard, the Black male football and basketball athlete has become one of the most highly visible, important stakeholders of these institutions and their athletic departments today.

Agyemang and his colleagues (see Agyemang, 2014; Agyemang, 2012; Agyemang & Singer, 2013; 2011; Agyemang, Singer, & DeLorme, 2010) have discussed how Black male professional and college athletes are prominent figures in sport and society and, as a result, have been subjected to intense media scrutiny and great pressure to act in a socially responsible manner. These scholars have focused on the ideas of individual social responsibility (ISR), athlete activism, and athlete citizenship, and the attention given to these interrelated concepts when studying Black male athletes in American sports. Agyemang (2014) described the notion of Black male athletes being socially responsible, socially conscious, and good athlete citizens as the manner in which these individuals conduct themselves (both on and off the field/court of play), and the felt responsibility they have to make a positive contribution to and impact on society, including the organizations to which they belong (e.g., athletic departments).

Given the overemphasis by the media and other commentators (e.g., fans) on the

negative (e.g., domestic violence, sexual assault, violation of NCAA rules, academic

scandals, etc.), not positive (e.g., philanthropy, activism/advocacy, graduation,

academic achievement) conduct of individual, high profile Black male football and

basketball athletes, there is a need for scholars to further explore the notion of ISR

among this important stakeholder group in American sport.

Building upon of Agyemang and Singer's (2013) study on the ISR of Black male

professional athletes, the purpose of this study was to explore this notion of ISR among

Black male college athletes and to encourage them to reflect upon their responsibility as

athlete citizens. This is important because college sport has taken on many of the

attributes of the professional sport model; thus, athletes in this context might face

similar challenges as their parallels in professional sport. The college athletes discussed

in this paper are not referred to as student-athletes following the advice of Staurowsky

and Sack (2005) who explain the history of the NCAA's corrupt reason for invoking the

term "student-athlete." As indicated in previous research (Singer, 2008) Black college

athletes in particular have described viewing themselves as not being a student-athlete

due to their demanding athletics schedule and expectations. They might be better

described as athletes at the intercollegiate level of competition. Moreover, given the

historical legacy of racism against Black Americans in the U.S. (see Feagin, 2006;

Wallis, 2016), yet the high profile status of Black male college athletes at HWIHE

(particularly football and basketball players), these individuals represent a unique

subpopulation of college students whose voices should be heard regarding the concept

of ISR. In the sections to follow, we briefly outline the relevant literature, discuss the methods, and present the findings before offering some concluding thoughts.

Literature Review

The Black Male College Athlete at HWIHE

Since the full-scale integration of Black male athletes into athletic programs at HWIHE, several scholars and commentators have focused on the academic, athletic, and social experiences and outcomes of this particular group of students. The early pioneering work of Harry Edwards (1969, 1973) set the tone for this focus on the Black male in the NCAA major revenue-producing sports of football and basketball at HWIHE. Much of the literature has focused on the many challenges this student population has faced and the extent to which college athletics has hampered the overall educational development of Black male athletes as a whole (see Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013). For example, the literature has emphasized how young Black boys have been socialized at an early age to focus on athletic over academic prowess (e.g., Benson, 2000; Singer, 2009); the identity development of Black male athletes (Bimper & Harrison, 2011; Harrison, Sailes, Rotich, & Bimper, 2011); the educational disparities between Black male athletes and their peers (e.g., Harrison, Comeaux, & Plecha, 2006; Purdy, Eitzen, & Hufnagel, 1982); the racial stereotypes (e.g., "dumb jock", "Black athletic superiority") aimed at Black male athletes (e.g., Edwards, 1984; Sailes, 1993; Hodge, Burden, Robinson, & Bennett, 2008); the psychological wellness, socialization, and career transition of Black male athletes (e.g., Beamon & Bell, 2006; Kelly & Dixon, 2014; Parham, 1993); and the overall academic and economic exploitation of Black male athletes (e.g., Donnor, 2005; Hawkins, 2010; Singer, 2013, 2015).

Some of the literature has moved beyond the focus on the myriad of educational challenges Black male athletes have faced and emphasized how Black male college athletes have overcome these challenges despite the systemic inequities they face at HWIHE (e.g., Bimper, Harrison, & Clark, 2012). Furthermore, scholars have stressed the need to engage Black male athletes in educationally useful activities (both inside and outside the university classroom) beyond the athletic playing field and court (e.g., Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Singer, 2015). Such activities could allow Black male college athletes the opportunity to explore and reflect upon who they are, their potential, and the responsibilities they have as individuals who are often in the spotlight as college athletes in big-time college sport organizations. In this regard, a brief discussion of the literature pertaining to the notion of ISR is warranted.

The Black Athlete and Individual Social Responsibility (ISR)

The broad topic of Black athletes and social responsibility began to gain widespread attention during the Civil Rights Movement. In the book *The Revolt of the Black Athlete,* Harry Edwards (1969) discussed the prominent role that Black athletes at both the professional and college levels played in using their visibility and platform to address some of the blatant racism and other social ills in the broader society during those turbulent times. Edwards and others (e.g., Powell, 2008) have suggested Black athletes from the Civil Rights Movement era paved the way for today's Black athletes, but unfortunately, many of today's Black athletes have shown little interest in addressing the myriad of social issues that exist today. Agyemang, Singer, and DeLorme (2010) conducted an exploratory study of Black male college athletes' perceptions of race and athlete activism and found these Black male athletes acknowledged the importance of

their predecessors' activist work and the ongoing significance of race today. More interestingly, although these athletes expressed that Black athletes do have a responsibility to speak on social issues, they acknowledged the differences between the mindsets and attitudes of today's generation of Black athletes and those of their predecessors. Essentially, they believed Black athletes from the Civil Rights Movement era were more connected to the Black struggle and seemed to embrace a greater sense of social responsibility than today's Black athletes who, from their perspective, seem more concerned with protecting their individual self-interests than engaging in social and political activism. This perspective was apparently fueled by the context of athletes in today's more highly commercialized, competitive sport industry. Agyemang (2012) built on this point in his conceptual paper on the role Michael Jordan's lack of visible activism has potentially played in the lack of engagement from most of today's Black male athletes.

Given the presence of Black male athletes in the major professional and college sports of football and basketball in the U.S. and the prominent role they play in contributing to the growing commercialism of these sports, Agyemang and Singer (2011) discussed the notion of Black male athlete social responsibility (BMSRA) and suggested these athletes could be viewed as a business entity that should engage in socially responsible behavior and activities in efforts to protect and enhance their individual image and overall growth and development as members of the Black community. In a follow-up study, Agyemang and Singer (2013) furthered explored this notion of ISR among Black male athletes via a case study with stakeholders (including athletes) of an NBA franchise. Findings revealed these stakeholders believed Black

male professional athletes not only have a responsibility to self, but also a responsibility

to be a role model (particularly to the youth), a responsibility to the broader Black

community, and a responsibility to engage in genuine activity aimed at addressing

social issues. Agyemang (2014) extended this work on ISR to discuss the notion of

athlete citizenship among professional athletes in general, and Black male professional

athletes in particular. He advanced a strategic framework for athletes to consider when

successfully engaging in authentic relationships with community stakeholders that could

build a positive reputation and enhance their brand image, among other benefits.

In the current study, we seek to extend the above-mentioned work of Agyemang

and colleagues by focusing on how college athletes view their social responsibility as

individuals who participate in big-time college sport in the current era of the highly

commercialized college football Bowl Championship Series (BCS). Similar to Agyemang

and Singer's (2013) study, we take a qualitative, field-based approach to this topic, but

focus only on the perspectives of Black male athletes as we strive to better understand

this notion of ISR among Black male athlete citizens within the context of college sport.

Methodology

The research design for this pilot study was a basic, interpretive qualitative

design (see Merriam, 2002). We embarked on this small scale exploratory study to

garner some initial insights into Black male athletes' perspectives on ISR and evaluate

the feasibility of a full-scale study (see Hulley et al, 2013) going forward. Our basic

inductive approach for analyzing qualitative data (see Thomas, 2006) involved

conducting individual interviews and interpreting the data in efforts to understand the

perspectives of these Black male athletes at the particular point in time we interviewed

them on the campus where they participated as college athletes. The lead investigator, serving as the research instrument (see Merriam, 2002), sought to discover and translate these perspectives of these Black male athletes in the big-time college sport program which was the focal point of this study.

This study took place at a large, public HWIHE in the Southeastern U.S., and the athletic programs participate in one of the five major power conferences (i.e., football BCS members). The athletic programs have a long history and legacy of success and have competed for national championships in recent years. Year in and year out the football program attracts a top 10 recruiting class of blue-chip high school athletes (particularly Black males) to the university, and the football program is consistently in the top 25 national rankings. Many of the football athletes are drafted into the National Football League (NFL) each year, which certainly contributes to the program's ability to continually attract the most talented athletes each year.

Gaining and maintaining access for research with minority groups within prominent organizations can be challenging (Altinay & Wang, 2009; Okumus, Altinay, & Roper, 2007). Access to the participants in our study was granted through the help of an Assistant Athletic Director, who served as a gatekeeper at the institution where this study took place. This process was facilitated largely in part because the lead researcher was a former graduate student at the institution who had also worked as a mentor to athletes in the academic support center for athletes while there. Once given clearance from the institution's athletic department, the lead researcher traveled to the university and spent 2 days on campus during the summer of 2014. The gatekeeper provided the lead researcher with a private room in the study hall area of the academic

support for athletics center. This allowed him to actively recruit potential participants

through direct contact with athletes who were present in study hall and had the

availability to engage in a short interview.

In selecting participants for this study, the lead researcher employed purposeful

sampling (see Patton, 2002), where potential participants had to meet the following

base criteria: (1) male college football and/or basketball athlete, (2) self-identified as

Black or African-American, (3) 18 years old and over, and (4) remaining athletic

eligibility. Snowball sampling was also employed by asking participants to recommend

similar peers for interviewing (Groenewald, 2004). The process of purposeful sampling

and snowball sampling was used under the umbrella of convenience sampling, with the

ultimate goal of selecting participants who were most accessible, willing, and able to

participate in this exploratory study. Ultimately, four Black male football athletes agreed

to participate in this study (see Table 1). Table 1 shows the pseudonym they chose,

age, race/ethnicity identification, hometown, sport and position, and their classification

and major. The original plan was to have representation from both basketball and

football, yet due to the nature of gathering research participants during scheduled study

hall time periods the availability of basketball athletes was limited.

Based on each of our respective and collective experiences working with Black

male college football and basketball athletes in various formal and informal capacities at

HWIHE (e.g., instructional faculty, academic mentors, recreational basketball

participants), we acknowledged our personal assumptions about Black male college

athletes going into this study. We indeed believe them to be role models who should be

mindful of their personal and professional responsibilities to various stakeholder groups.

As Black males who were students and currently teach at HWIHE ourselves, we also acknowledge the continuing significance of race and the role it plays in the experiences of Black male college students in general and athletes in particular at these institutions and in the broader U.S. society. While we acknowledged these assumptions and the lead researcher made conscious efforts to temper them in efforts to allow the participants to fully express their personal perspectives unabated, we also note the importance of being transparent about one's researcher positionality and how this contributes to the authenticity of the research process, particularly when studying issues pertaining to race and culture (see Milner, 2007).

Table 1. *List of Research Participants*

Pseudonym	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Sport – Position	Classification – Major
Rod	18	Black: African-American	Football – Offensive Line	1st year, Freshman – Information Technology
James	19	Black: African-American/ White (Mixed Race)	Football – Linebacker	1st year, Freshman – Exploratory (General Studies)
Van	20	Black: African-American/ Hebrew	Football – Linebacker	3rd year, Junior – Sociology
Tony	21	Black: African-American	Football – Defensive Back	4th year, (Redshirt) Junior – Sociology

Participants were asked to take part in 30-60 minute semi-structured face-to-face interviews with the lead researcher, including filling out a short demographic questionnaire and responding to questions geared toward garnering their perspectives on the notion of ISR. Interviews were audio recorded with consent given by research participants. Three broad open-ended interview questions drove the primary data

collection: (1.) Charles Barkley – "I am not a role model." How do you feel about that statement? (2.) What does it mean to be socially responsible? (3.) How does being a Black male affect your status and impact on society? The lead researcher used memos as a mechanism of writing notes, including field notes and code notes, throughout the research process to assist in the understanding and development of emergent broad themes.

The audio recordings were transcribed by the lead researcher, and data were analyzed through reviewing the recordings and transcripts multiple times in order to develop relevant categories that could be constructed into key themes (see Thomas, 2006). Important codes, text segments that contain meaningful units of data, were identified from the transcripts and organized into emerging categories. The categories were then revised and reduced by combining categories with similar meanings to create key themes that summarize the data. Trustworthiness of the data analysis was addressed through peer debriefing and member checking, whereby the two researchers deliberated over the categories and themes and the participants were allowed to provide feedback on the initial transcripts to ensure their perspectives were recorded correctly. Findings from this effort are reported below.

Findings

Our general findings from this study uncovered the following two key themes: role modeling ethical behavior and overcoming marginalization. Due to Black male college athletes' visibility and idol status as athletes of a Division I athletic program, they have expectations from others and themselves to be *role models*, express high ethical values and engage in acts of *ethical behavior*, in tandem with *overcoming*

marginalization related to racial stereotypes and stigma. These general themes will be extrapolated in the sections below.

Role Modeling Ethical Behavior

The notion of *role model* highlights the impactful role that Black male college athletes play in society as athlete citizens and comes about through the context of Black male college athletes' visibility and idol-like status. Van underscored the importance of image and how the youth look up to Black male college athletes:

> I'm a role model to all the young guys, you know. Especially back home. You know, a lot of the younger guys play football and watch me play, and they look up to me. And even my peers back home, still back home, you know, they wanna see me do great. I make sure I keep my nose clean. You know, guys from my school coming in here gotten in trouble in the past and ain't really made it out of here real successfully. I'm tryna change that…A lot of the young cats look up to us and, you know, wanna do the things we're doing.

Having a high-profile celebrity status brings upon a particular visibility and behavioral expectations. Although Rod does not explicitly claim to be a role model, he does recognize how others view him as such; therefore, there is a responsibility to some extent to acknowledge this. In reference to being viewed as a role model, Rod extensively explained:

> I don't claim a role model I just do right behind closed doors 'cause you never know who's watching and people may be following you and think that you are they role model or mentor so just do right by the good book and you'll see, you might be somebody's model but I don't think I'm anybody's role model as of right now

Although Rod modestly did not claim to be a role model, he clearly indicates that he is viewed as such. It became more apparent why he did not wholeheartedly believe to be a role model at the moment when he compared his status as a college athlete to more renowned celebrities who have a larger platform and following. Rod continued his rather

lengthy elaboration on this notion of Black male college athletes being a role model by

discussing how the more visible and famous a person becomes the greater

expectations on them to be role models:

> Some people admire celebrities and sports people like LeBron James. LeBron James is a role model to many people. And Beyoncé and Jay-Z, they're role models to more. It's all how high up the food chain you are; you will be role model material. You become a celebrity by what you do and how good you do it. So some people take their profession and become real good and become exposed to the world. And people enjoy what they do so they become famous…There's not much difference between a college athlete and a professional athlete. They're both under watch. So they have rules to follow and they have fans. So people here, they know that they are being watched by the NCAA and they have college football fans, knowing this is a college town, so they be kind on and off the field… Their responsibility is to not only have fun on the field but win, is a good responsibility. And when you win on the field, and you become famous, they expect you to probably give back to the community. So they'll have to do community service. But it is also a responsibility to becoming a celebrity by giving back to where you come from.

Tony shared similar sentiments to Rod when discussing the role of college athletes as

role models, whereas he believed the standard to which college athletes should be held

accountable should be lower than that of adult professional athletes:

> You know, some of us come in here, we're still kids. I didn't want to bring this up, you feel me, but like some of the kids, you feel me, as far as [Star Heisman Candidate Quarterback], a freshman, you feel me, this man got exposure, just like Johnny Manziel got exposure, you feel me, these are kids! They can't even go outside, they can't even go get their own stuff without people taking pictures of them. They can't joke around or somebody's gonna misinterpret [them]. People shouldn't be living like that, you feel me. I think the standard they hold us to is too high. I feel like we should be held to a standard but they gotta understand we are kids, man! We make mistakes, you feel me. This our first time being away from our parents, you feel me. You don't really learn, you don't really understand what's going on in the world until like, your junior or senior year because then you start to see like the other kids that come in who're big-headed and don't have no sense of direction, and then you look back and you have that feeling like, I wish I could go back in time and do this the other way.

These quotes above are reflective of the general sentiments expressed by the

participants in this study that, by virtue of their highly visible status, whether they like it

or not, being a role model is a responsibility individual athletes are faced with today.

Given the public perception of Black male athletes as role models, there are

social pressures and expectations for Black male college athletes to behave ethically

and be good citizens. This is considered to be an intervening condition by which Black

male college athletes should express moral character. In doing so they must participate

in actions that service their community. There is a sense of a civic duty to be

responsible to your community and accountable toward self and family. This influences

the notion of *ethical behavior* from Black male college athletes. When providing

examples of socially responsible ethical behavior and good citizenship James stated:

> [Prominent Head Coach], had Lift for Life for his kid last week. I did that also. And I mean every time I go home I try to do something. Like if I'm home for Thanksgiving like I try to do something like giving food or something like that to the homeless. Not everyone back home got the same opportunity as me so, I mean, if I see someone that could need a little bit of help or not even a little bit of help just make them smile, I try to help… I try to help everyone out the same. I mean, of course I put my family and my friends on higher pedestals than anyone else but other than that I don't try to single out like anyone.

There is a sense of wanting to give back to those in need within the community and

taking care of relatives. Tony shared:

> It's just like for myself, I have twelve brothers and sisters, you feel me. And I'm literally the oldest out of my 12 brothers and sisters, so it's a lot of pressure on me. I have to do something, you feel me. Cause I have to set the bar. You represent your family, so you gonna represent your family the best way you can. And I want all my brothers and sisters to do better than me.

Rod explained how the notion of being a role model extends to engaging in socially

responsible behavior and civic duty as a model for youth, especially younger siblings:

> You have like a little brother and your little brother is doing things that you're doing. So he wants to be just like you when he grows up…you like treat him good, follow all the rules, and like try to keep your nose clean, like don't break any of the laws and stuff like that. Be kind and courteous and respectful and you'll be considered a good role model.

Interestingly, multiple participants discussed the notion that being a good citizen and role model involved keeping your "nose clean," suggesting Black male athletes today have a social responsibility to avoid and stay out of trouble. Tony explained his method of staying out of trouble:

> I was raised different than a lot of people, you feel me. I'm not a flashy guy, I don't drink, I don't do none of that stuff, you feel me. I don't go out, I choose to stay in the house. My good weekend is sitting at the house playing the game because it always kept me out of trouble. I don't like being around people, like in that environment, you feel me, that drinking, you know, people just acting of emotions. I don't like to put myself in that situation.

Van also described how being a college athlete's impact on society involves being a role model to youth and includes representing family honorably:

> I know, for the most part, we have an impact on the young society. You got young people watching you, you know. Not even just the youth, you know, for your family cause you represent them. And you don't wanna, you know, embarrass them.

In tandem with protecting their image and status as idols of others, these participants felt Black male athletes must practice ethical behavior. It is the responsibility of Black male athletes, as influential people, to behave in a manner that benefits their community. The participants in the study shared stories about engaging in community service, being law abiding citizens, and practicing excellent manners, especially towards relatives.

Overcoming Marginalization

The category of *overcoming marginalization* speaks to the challenges of overcoming racial issues that Black male athletes experience at Division I athletic programs. When asked about how being Black affects his social responsibility, Van really felt his race was a substantial aspect of his social responsibility and stated:

> Just you know, I mean, it's just real different. Like you always hear, like a lot of these issues about, you know, Black athletes getting in trouble, about this and that. You know, it's greatly frowned upon. And then, you know, you hear about White athletes getting in trouble here and there but like no one remembers that. Everyone remembers the Black dude that, you know, did some dumb stuff, you know what I'm saying…I mean, it's empowering, you know, for the most part, especially being at this White university, you know we're a minority, you know, we all wanna see each other succeed.

For this participant, being Black means to succeed beyond the low expectations, negative stereotypes, and criticism that Black male athletes often encounter, and to overcome the double standards they are often subjected to in comparison to their White peers.

> James also acknowledged how race impacts his individual social responsibility: When people think role model they don't usually think of like Black people a lot because like they just don't think they're like…I mean they just don't think of Black people as role models because of what they see on TV and stuff. there's a lot of…well athletes, there's definitely a lot of role models but other than that like socially there's probably not that many…you don't hear that many like athletes just doing like charity events or anything like that. But like anytime any of those White guys do just one or just show up to one for like five minutes you like hear all about it.

It is recognized that Black athletes serve as role models yet perceptions are that they are not as competent as others. Black male athletes are mainly admired for their athleticism; even as an athlete, Black males do not receive the same treatment and respect as their White athlete peers. Black male athletes have to manage their social responsibility while simultaneously dealing with racial prejudice and the stigma of inferiority. Black male college athletes must learn to cope with and combat social

constructions of racial privilege and power. They have to overcome marginalization and

exceed expectations in order to honor their family, community, and heritage. Tony

explained:

> I take pride, you feel me, in me being a Black male just because of our history…as far as, you feel me…let's be honest, the majority of Black people [are] in poverty and to be real, the only way out, you feel me…I'm sorry, you know a lot of White people are privileged, you feel me. You know, they seek knowledge and intelligence, and it's not seen as being a loser, as a bad thing. Whereas, if you go into like where I grew up, you feel me, intelligence, if you…you feel me, they call you nerd. That's a bad thing, as far as where I come from. People try to take the quick way out, you feel me. Some people try to play sports, other people do rapping. You're a product of your environment. And it's just ways to get out, you feel me. It's how your family raise you, if your mom can keep you away from that bad stuff, you feel me…C'mon now, you and I know that these people, these stars, you feel me, they have their own stories about how they came up, about how they came into this situation, about how hard they had to work, you feel me.

Being Black is an opportunity to perform in a manner that is worthy of honor and

positively represents your community against negative stereotypes. The majority of the

participants expressed how race can indeed be a factor in their experiences as a

college athlete engaging in social responsibility. However, one participant expressed he

did not believe race mattered. When discussing whether there were any differences

among athletes of particular races, Rod said:

> Not at all. It shouldn't matter about…it's not who you are. It's just the point of you giving back to the community no matter what you are, or what sport, color, or gender you are. The point is that you are giving back to the community; it's all that counts.

The Black male college athletes in this study expressed the desire to succeed

and build a positive reputation for themselves and their culture. The historical struggle

against systemic racism affects their attitude and actions toward impacting their

community.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the notion of ISR among Black male college athletes at a NCAA Division I athletic program and to garner a baseline understanding of how they perceive their responsibility as athlete citizens in sport and society. Some of the previous research of Agyemang and colleagues has likened Black male athletes in American sports to individual business entities or corporations that should be engaged in socially responsible behavior (Agyemang, 2014; Agyemang & Singer, 2011); but, with the exception of Agyemang, Singer, and DeLorme's (2010) exploratory work on the concepts of race and athlete activism among Black male college athletes at a major university, the majority of this work on Black male athletes and the notion of social responsibility has focused on professional sport. Therefore, our study sought to extend this work by focusing on Black male college athletes at another major university in an FBS conference and how they viewed this notion of individual social responsibility, similar to what Agyemang and Singer (2013) examined among Black male professional athletes and other stakeholders of an NBA franchise.

Not surprisingly, the findings from our study are similar to the findings in previous research focused on Black male professional athletes. Considering the concept of individual social responsibility of Black male athletes in the context of both professional and college sports, there is the situation of possessing an idol-like status as a highly visible public figures; this demands that today's Black male athletes should behave as role models. Whether these athletes personally care to be a role model or not, they share the responsibility to be an example to those who admire them, especially young people who view them as idols. There is also a consistent insistence that they embrace

ethical values and engage in community service, especially in regard to serving the

Black community for which they represent. For an athlete, being a role model includes

being a model citizen who sets standards for everyone to scrutinize, with the media

ready to critique your every move. Therefore, if you are perceived to engage in

misconduct, you will be ridiculed, yet when you conduct yourself in an honorable

manner you will be praised.

Perhaps the most interesting finding from our study that is worth further

discussing and exploring in future research is the theme of overcoming marginalization

in regard to issues with race. Echoing the sentiments of West (1993) and the Black

male college athletes in Agyemang, Singer, and DeLorme's (2010) study, the athletes in

our study indicated that race does indeed matter and is an issue with which they must

deal. Moreover, they believed that being a Black athlete in the White sports

establishment created an added burden of social responsibility that is not present for

their White counterparts. This is similar to the perceptions of the Black male college

athletes in Singer's (2005) case study, who felt Black athletes face differential treatment

in comparison to White athletes in college sport today. The historical and continued

legacy of racism in sport and society might very well create additional challenges for

Black male athletes when it comes to social responsibility and how Black male athletes'

engage with important stakeholders, yet it comes as a challenge accepted. Quite often

Black male athletes, including those in this study and their college athlete peers as well

as professional athletes take the opportunity to dedicate time and resources to civic

engagement activities doing community service, hosting youth camps, and participating

in charities. Many of these activities are geared towards providing empowerment

experiences to communities of color and youth groups in need that assist in the cause of community development.

Interestingly, in comparison to their predecessors who faced more direct, blatant, overt forms of racism during the Civil Rights Movement, it has been argued that Black male athletes of today have a different mindset when it comes to engaging in socially responsible behavior, particularly as it relates to uplifting the Black community (Agyemang, 2012; Agyemang, Singer, DeLorme, 2010; Powell, 2008). During the Civil Rights Movement, when race relations were very turbulent and popular Black athletes began to recognize they could use their status to influence social justice, track stars John Carlos and Tommie Smith raised their clinched fists at the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City during the playing of the national anthem at the medal ceremony in order to bring awareness to racism and racial discrimination in the US on an international stage. Similarly in 2016, National Football League quarterback Colin Kaepernick began to gain national recognition for protesting during the national anthem at NFL games by taking a knee to bring awareness to police brutality against people of color in the US. Also in response to recent issues with police brutality against people of color, many other prominent athletes have followed the lead of Colin Kaepernick and the Black Lives Matter Movement, to use their platform as a vehicle to promote social change around the topic of race relations. There has even been recent social activism among some Black male athletes on college campuses of HWIHE today, such as the University of Missouri football player protest. However, many commentators have suggested the fame and fortune Black male athletes have been able to accumulate today and their fear of falling out of favor with various stakeholder groups (e.g., fans, corporate

sponsors, employers) discourages them from engaging in socially responsible behavior geared toward truly addressing the systemic racism that continues to plague the Black community in particular. Agyemang (2014) discussed the notion of community stakeholder engagement as a method of exhibiting social responsibility and athlete citizenship qualities. Scholars should consider building upon and extending Agyemang's framework. Below, we conclude by briefly discussing the limitations of this study and future directions and questions scholars might explore going forward.

Conclusion

Given this study's exploratory nature, it certainly was limited in scope and depth. Only four participants were involved in this study. Therefore, the data collected in this study was of quality, yet not of extensive quantity. The lack of cooperation from the institution, even after gaining clearance to conduct the study, presented difficulties to recruit additional participants. A follow up investigation should include a commitment from an athletic program, or multiple programs, that a more substantial number of participants will be accessible to be involved in the study. Future research should employ qualitative research designs in particular (e.g., case studies, ethnographic studies, participatory action research studies, phenomenological studies, grounded theory studies, narrative inquiry studies) to dig and delve deeper into Black male college and professional athlete's perceptions of social responsibility and athlete citizenship today. Several potential topics of inquiry might further explore the following: What does it mean to be socially responsible, and how might race impact it? What is the relationship between social responsibility, athlete citizenship, and social activism? What are the similarities and differences between and among Black male athletes in

professional and college sport? Are there notable distinctions between Black male athletes in the professional and college ranks? Are there differences between current and retired Black male athletes? Are there differences between Black male athletes at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU) and their peers at HWIHE? What role do Black male athletes play in social justice movements today (e.g., Black Lives Matter)? These and many other questions should be studied vigorously in efforts to help empower Black male athletes to reflect on their stake and role in sport and the broader communities from which they come (i.e., families and hometowns) as well as those they are immersed in (i.e., college campuses and the towns they are in, professional sport franchises and the cities they are in).

In conclusion, anyone can employ individual social responsibility. People in the U.S. and other parts of the world do so on a daily basis. Yet, individuals such as college and professional athletes who have certain levels of power and influence are especially expected to conduct themselves in socially responsible ways. Given the unique history and legacy of racism and injustice Black people have faced in the U.S. in particular, Black people who have ascended to certain heights in White mainstream society have been viewed by people within and outside the Black community as role models and individuals who should use their power and status as highly visible citizens to effectuate positive change. In this regard, we pose the rhetorical questions, how do Black male athletes see themselves, and what does it mean for their engagement (or lack thereof) in socially responsible behavior and athlete citizenship? Our study with Black male college athletes was but a small contribution to what we hope will be a rich area of inquiry going forward.

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