Once You See It, You Can’t Unsee It?: Racial Justice Activism and Articulations of Whiteness Among White Collegiate Athlete Activists

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Abstract:

The goal of this study was to examine how athletes holding privileged racial identities understand their whiteness as they engage in racial justice activism. Drawing from twelve semi-structured interviews with white collegiate athletes who have engaged in activism for racial justice, we identified four higher-order themes which we situate within a broader discussion of how each theme either reinforces or disrupts racial power: articulations of (1) racial consciousness, (2) white privilege, (3) white empathy, and (4) white accountability. While the white accountability theme has the potential to disrupt racial power due to its relying on rigorous self-critique, the remaining themes pointed to limited understandings of the systemic nature of racism, which can thus inadvertently (re)produce white supremacy even when engaging in activism for racial justice. Limitations, implications, and future directions for research are
discussed to empower more white athletes to reflect critically on whiteness and facilitate systemic change.

Keywords: critical whiteness studies, social justice, diversity, equity, race, intercollegiate sport, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA)
In the summer of 2020, the United States (U.S.) witnessed a rejuvenation of the Black Lives Matter movement following the continued murders of unarmed Black Americans by law enforcement within months of each other. As a result, conversations about police brutality, whiteness, and institutional anti-Black racism coursed through academic and non-academic spaces in the U.S. and across the (“Western”) world. Accordingly, the U.S. was forced to confront its long, convoluted history with racial injustice and the legacies of systemic racism. Because sport cannot be separated from the society in which it operates (Kaufman & Wolff, 2010), the rejuvenation of the Black Lives Matter movement also manifested in the institution of sport. Indeed, athletes across leagues, sports, and sport organizations alike utilized their platforms to call attention to the systemic injustices faced by Black Americans and other racially minoritized populations, drawing from a rich legacy of athletes who have historically used their involvement in sport to demonstrate solidarity for Black Americans and promote positive social change (Zirin, 2021).

Athletes from minoritized groups are most likely to engage in activism (Mac Intosh et al., 2020). Therefore, it is not surprising that most research on activism in sport has focused on the experiences of Black athletes (Fuller & Agyemang, 2018), women (Cooky, 2017), LGBTQ+ individuals (Anderson et al., 2016), athletes with disabilities or impairments (Bundon & Hurd Clarke, 2015), and individuals holding multiple of the aforementioned identities (Calow, 2021). A significant gap in the scholarship, however, points to the experiences and perceptions of collegiate athletes engaged in activism for racial justice who benefit from the racial hegemony: white athletes. White people often inadvertently (re)produce structural racism on an everyday basis and, as Leonardo (2004) has argued convincingly, “whites recreate their own racial supremacy, despite good intentions” (p. 144). Therefore, the purpose of this exploratory study
was to examine how collegiate athlete activists who identify as white understand their whiteness and negotiate their racial privilege while engaging in activism for racial justice. Such information can be used to identify how white people can more effectively work towards progressive and sustainable systemic social change for racial justice without recreating the issue they seek to eradicate.

**Critical Whiteness Studies**

Informed by their work in legal studies during the 1970s and 1980s, Black scholars have developed Critical Race Theory to call attention to how race has operated as a social construct that serves the interest of white people while systematically disadvantaging other racial groups (Bell, 1980; Crenshaw, 1988; Crenshaw et al., 1995). Critical Race Theory scholars challenge the notion that racism solely manifests in individual acts of hatred (a common misperception among the general public) and instead posit racism is structural and integrated into the cultural, political, and social institutions to systemically benefit white people (Gilborn & Ladson-Billings, 2019). Informed by the groundbreaking work of critical race theorists and the pioneers paving the way for the critical analysis of systemic racism over a century ago (see e.g., Du Bois, 1920), *critical whiteness studies* emerged as a critique to studies within the field that reduced inquiry into whiteness to developmental models of white identity and racial consciousness. In turn, critics argued, the institutional and systemic nature of white domination was dismissed (Thompson, 2003; Leonardo, 2004). With the goal of calling into question the systems that reinforce white supremacy as ideology (Applebaum, 2016), critical whiteness scholars argue that whiteness cannot be separated from structures of white supremacy and cannot “[forsake] structural analysis for a focus on the individual” (Leonardo, 2004, p. 141).
Leonardo (2013), in particular, critiques how critical whiteness studies must move away from looking at identity and privilege (i.e., micro level) as the center of analysis to manifestations of whiteness as ideological tools reinforcing white hegemony (i.e., the macro level). He writes:

… the theme of privilege obscures the subject of domination, or the agent of actions, because the situation is described as happening almost without the knowledge of whites. … The study of white privilege begins to take on an image of domination without agents. It obfuscates the historical process of domination in exchange for a state of dominance in media res … removing the actions that make it clear who is doing what to whom. Instead of emphasizing the process of appropriation, the discourse of privilege centers the discussion on the advantages that whites receive. It mistakes the symptoms for causes.


As such, critical whiteness studies move beyond raising awareness of white privilege toward dismantling the structural hierarchy reinforcing the hegemony of whiteness (Foste & Irwin, 2020).

A key concept in critical whiteness studies is the idea that white people are complicit in keeping white supremacy intact (Applebaum, 2010; Foste & Irwin, 2020). Therefore, critical whiteness scholars must pay close attention to the ways in which white people contribute to the perpetuation of white dominance, despite good intentions or awareness of their white privilege (Applebaum, 2010). For example, white people are socialized into misunderstanding how racism operates on a structural level which works to reinforce racial power (Fields, 2001; Leonardo & Manning, 2017). In addition, Foste and Irwin (2020) argue that the act of being aware of one’s whiteness in itself does not lead to structural change, but rather preserves whiteness. They have
posited that increased racial consciousness and understanding of racial privilege can deflect from the rigorous self-critique needed to understand one’s position within structures of white supremacy (Foste & Irwin, 2020). Contextualization of white people’s racial awareness through the acknowledgment of structural components of whiteness is of utmost importance, so that “we do not take white participants’ narratives as the final source of authority; rather, speech acts should be examined for their role in creating identity categories grounded in inequitable power structures” (Foste & Irwin, 2020, p. 452).

White Activists’ Engagement in Racial Justice Activism

It is not surprising then that for white activists’ efforts to be effective, they need to have a thorough understanding of their own role in upholding white supremacy and racial inequities, an endeavor that sometimes can be challenging even for those white people committed to racial justice (Eichstedt, 2001). Researchers looking at constructions of whiteness among those attempting to disrupt the current system, such as white antiracist activists, found that well-intentioned white people often inadvertently reinforce white supremacist ideologies. For example, Hughey (2010; 2012) studied constructions of whiteness among white members of two activist organizations at opposite ends of the political spectrum: a white nationalist organization as well as a white antiracist organization. Hughey (2010) found striking similarities between the two when it came to its members’ constructions of whiteness, so much so that he concluded that “white racial identities cannot be distilled into static political formations that are distinct and separable; rather they share a common allegiance to dominant racial (and often racist) ideologies that transcend differing belief systems” (p. 1306). Specifically, participants across both organizations bought into essentialist views of whiteness (i.e., white people as being inherently different from and superior to their racially minoritized peers) and engaged in forms of intra-
racial distinction through which they separated themselves from white peers deemed inadequate in performing what they viewed as appropriate white identity (Hughey, 2010; 2012).

These findings support established research documenting many white activists’ inability to apply the critical consciousness needed to achieve antiracist outcomes to their own activist practice (Case, 2012; Warren, 2010). For example, while expressions of systemic racism are often fairly obvious for racially minoritized activists, such manifestations are harder to recognize for white activist peers (Case, 2012). In their study of white activists’ participation in efforts to remove racist imagery and mascots from Major League Baseball’s Cleveland franchise, Jacobs and Taylor (2011) documented those white activists were at times hesitant to perform necessary organizational tasks to counteract white guilt, which in turn affected the efficiency of the antiracist endeavors. The white activists gave leadership roles to their racially minoritized peers not because they bought into their leadership, but rather because they saw it as a strategy not to engage in as much depth with the organization’s work (Jacobs & Taylor, 2011). Set in a different cultural context, Ebert and Pillay (2022) also identified guilt as a barrier to antiracist change; they examined white people’s racial justice activism in South Africa and found that activists were not engaging on issues of race at all due to feelings of guilt over their racial privilege.

Because such behaviors can be harmful not only to activist efforts but also to the people who would benefit from the activism, scholars have started to look at the impact white racial justice activists can have on their racially minoritized peers engaging in activism. For example, Gorski (2019a, 2019b) found a key contributor to the activist burnout of activists of color was the behaviors of their white activist peers, many of whom “carried their privilege and entitlement into racial justice movements” (Gorski & Erakat, 2019, p. 786). In doing so, they at times perpetuated racist views, were lacking the action-oriented mindset to step up when needed, took
credit for their racially minoritized peers’ work, and demonstrated defensiveness and white
fragility (Gorski & Erakat, 2019). Such tendencies can effectively undermine the efforts of
racially minoritized activists and the movements of which they are a part (Gorski, 2019a;
Jonsson, 2016; Mallett et al., 2008; Warren, 2010). Because these findings show that white
activism can be counterproductive to racial justice movements, yet athlete activism in the arena
of sport is becoming more common (Mac Intosh et al., 2020), it is important to better understand
the experiences – and potentially harmful behaviors – of white athlete activists committed to
racial justice who choose to use their involvement in sport for activist efforts.

Race, Critical Whiteness Studies, and Activism in College Sport

The racial hegemony caused by a system that protects and reinforces whiteness is also
reflected in the institution of sport (Hawkins et al., 2017). Although sociologists focused on the
study of race in sport initially solely examined the impact of the existence of racism in sport,
they more recently have extended their scope to “think of sport as a contested terrain: a space
where racial ideologies are circulated, imposed, resisted, changed, and altered” (Carrington,
2013, p. 389). Inquiries into the construction of race and the impact of systemic racism have
ranged from examining the persistence of whiteness in sport leadership (Bradbury, 2013),
socialization into racialized sport (Brooks & McKail, 2008), the intersections of racial and
athletic identities (Harrison et al., 2011), barriers facing racially minoritized individuals on
predominantly white college campuses (Bimper, 2017; Singer, 2005), experiences of racially
minoritized athletes at historically Black colleges and universities (Cooper, 2013), racist
stereotypes facing racially minoritized individuals (Sailes, 1993), and development of a sense of
belonging among racially minoritized individuals or lack thereof (Carter-Francique, 2018).
Researchers have also looked at whiteness in the context of college sport to examine the various ways in which it serves as a site for the maintenance of white power (King, 2005). For example, Vadeboncoeur and Bopp (2019) reviewed literature on white racial identity among collegiate athletes and found that white athletes have high racial consciousness yet often fail to understand how their whiteness affords them structural power. In a separate study, Vadeboncoeur and Bopp (2020) provided further evidence that while white athletes were often able to articulate how whiteness shaped a distinct racial identity and identify examples of overt racism, they struggled to point to the structural nature of racism and the role whiteness played within it. Drawing from critical whiteness studies specifically, Hextrum (2020) pointed to three specific mechanisms that support the maintenance and prevent the disruption of white dominance: racial segregation (i.e., “the creation of racially segregated sporting experiences,” p. 388), racial innocence (i.e., institutions creating white spaces that allow white athletes not to think about their role in perpetuating racism), and racial protection (i.e., reinforcing white sports as “the standard of athletic excellence,” p. 390, emphasis in original). These processes facilitate and reinforce underdeveloped understandings of systemic racism among white athletes, thereby “allow[ing] white athletes to dodge their role in racism and avoid racial justice responsibilities” (Hextrum, 2020, p. 385).

It is not surprising, then, that research on activism has centered on racially minoritized groups (e.g., Agyemang et al., 2010) – rightfully so, given the central role of Black athletes in many activist movements (Edwards, 2017; Cooper et al., 2019). For decades, athletes – particularly athletes with minoritized identities – have used their status within and platforms provided by sport to speak out against racial injustice in the United States given their first-hand experiences with systemic oppression and discrimination (Agyemang et al., 2020) and fighting
for the communities of which they are a part (e.g., Coombs & Cassilo, 2017). Edwards (2017) has argued that athlete activist movements happen in waves, as they often correspond to social movements happening in society at large. However, because sport is often perceived as an apolitical space, backlash against athletes who engage in activism, particularly Black athletes, can be intense (Frederick et al., 2017; Kaufman, 2008; Sanderson et al., 2016). As a result, research on collegiate athlete activism often focuses on Black athletes’ activism against racism and their experiences with racism and backlash (Agyemang et al., 2010; Kaufman, 2008). For instance, in 2015, Black football players at the University of Missouri peacefully protested racially charged university-wide discrimination by refusing to play one of their games. Although this protest led to tangible structural change (with the university president resigning), it also shone a light on the integral and often invisible role and operationalization of whiteness in college sport (Frederick et al., 2017; Gill et al., 2020).

The Mizzou protest attests to the power of collegiate athlete activists, which may be why scholars have started to examine topics such as resource mobilization (Ferguson & Davis, 2019), motivations for activism (Kluch, 2021), definitions of activism (Kluch, 2020), overall experiences of activists (Fuller & Agyemang, 2018), and perceptions of activist efforts (Frederick et al., 2017) at the collegiate level. These studies, though, almost exclusively focus on collegiate athlete activists who identify as members of minoritized groups – such as Black athletes. Even though white collegiate athletes have expressed positive views in support of engaging in activism for social justice (Mac Intosh et al., 2020) and can utilize their racial power to create systemic change (Jolly et al., 2021), no research to date has examined how whiteness shapes white athlete activists’ engagement in activism. Therefore, the following questions guided this study:
RQ1: How do white collegiate athlete activists’ perceptions of race and racism affect their decision to engage in racial justice activism?

RQ2: How does whiteness affect white athletes’ engagement in racial justice activism?

**Methodology**

This study draws from interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), rooted philosophically in Heideggerian hermeneutics (Benner, 1994; Diekelmann, 2001), to find answers to the research questions above. A form of qualitative research tied to a constructionist epistemological tradition, IPA allows researchers to document participants’ perceptions of their lived experiences in the broader cultural context they operate in – and then provide an in-depth interpretation of those experiences (Patton, 2002; Smith, 2004). As Smith (2004) puts it, in IPA the “participant is trying to make sense of their personal and social world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world” (p. 40).

IPA provides a particularly valuable tool to examine white activism for racial justice because it does not only allow for the close examination of perceptions and interpretations of participants’ experience (i.e., participation in racial justice activism as a person with a privileged racial identity), but also situating them within the larger social context that those experiences emerge from (i.e., a society permeated by systemic racism). As such, “person and world are not separate but instead are co-constituting and mutually disclosing” (Palmer et al., 2010, p. 99).

Moreover, IPA has been used by scholars to study whiteness in the context of intercollegiate sport (see e.g., Vadeboncoeur & Bopp, 2020).

**Participants**

Studies utilizing IPA usually draw from a smaller number of participants in order to understand “each participant’s experience sufficiently to enable comparison with the experiences
of other persons in the study” (Porter & Cohen, 2012, p. 189). Recommendations for sample sizes for studies utilizing IPA range from as few as two to three participants (Dukes, 1984) to up to twelve participants (Ray, 1994), with a robust body of scholarship recommending between eight and twelve participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Parse, 1990; Ray, 1994; Smith et al., 2009). For the present study, twelve participants were recruited using criterion-based purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002). Participants had to self-identify as white, be active collegiate athletes at an NCAA Division I, II, or III institution, and self-identify as an activist for racial justice. Because there is no one way to do activism, participants’ involvement in activism ranged from activism on social media platforms (i.e., posts on Instagram and/or Twitter), individual physical actions at sporting competitions (i.e., kneeling during the national anthem), or engaging one’s community in social justice related initiatives (i.e., student-led organizations and panels).¹

Our research team utilized a variety of strategies to recruit participants. As researchers and practitioners in sport, we used our professional networks to recruit participants as a first strategy to identify potential participants. Each author reached out to athletic directors, administrators, professors, and/or coaches to identify potential participants and invite them to be a part of the study. It is important to note here that we reached out to individuals with whom we had built rapport through previous collaboration, as it was important to us that these individuals were able to identify potential participants whose activism may not be viewed favorably by the institutions that employ them. As an additional recruitment strategy, some of us used personal connections to students. For example, the lead author led a webinar focusing on social justice in sport in October 2020 which several collegiate athletes who were engaging in racial justice

¹ We realize that self-identifying as an activist does not speak to the impact of participants’ activism; that is, even though they may identify as activists for racial justice, this study cannot speak to the impact participants’ activism had. For example, scholars have pointed to the fact that social media activism, sometimes classified as slacktivism, can be performative rather than substantive in nature (see e.g., Linder et al., 2016).
activism attended. The lead author was then able to reconnect with those athletes to ask if they
would be willing to participate in the study. As a third recruitment strategy, research team
members also screened online and social media for news coverage of athlete activism and
reached out to collegiate athletes who were active on their respective social media accounts
about racial justice. For our final recruitment strategy, we relied on snowball sampling (Merriam
& Tisdell, 2016) to allow participants to suggest additional participants fitting the criteria of the
study. Potential participants were messaged directly to explain the purpose of the study. Once
approval was given for participation, a member of the research team contacted the participants to
arrange a suitable day and time for the interview.

Out of the twelve white collegiate athlete activists in the sample, five identified as men
and seven identified as women. The participants competed in a diverse range of sports, including
cross country/track and field (n = 4), American football (n = 2), gymnastics (n = 1), softball (n =
1), rowing, (n = 1), crew (n = 1) and swimming (n = 1). At the time of the data collection, two
participants were first-year students, four were juniors, five were seniors, and one was a graduate
student. To maintain confidentiality and protect the participants, pseudonyms were used and any
other personal identifiers from the transcripts were omitted.

Procedure

This study utilized semi-structured interviewing to understand white collegiate athletes’
perceptions and experiences engaging in racial justice activism. Interviews are a commonly used
method in IPA as they allow researchers glimpses into participants’ experiences (Porter &
Cohen, 2012). After securing IRB approval for the study, the researchers started to schedule
interviews with participants who had expressed interest in the study.² Interviews were scheduled

² While the data presented in this manuscript is focused on whiteness as it relates to racial justice activism, the data
were collected as part of a larger phenomenological study looking at the experiences of white collegiate athlete
at a time convenient for the participants and were conducted via video conferencing software
(i.e., Zoom). Utilizing a semi-structured interview guide as the research instrument, the
interviews covered a variety of topics related to whiteness, white racial identity, and racial justice
activism to get a comprehensive understanding of participants’ understanding of whiteness and
how it informs their activism. Specifically, the interview guide comprised sections on
participants identities (e.g. “When and how have you learned what it means to be white in the
United States?”), views on racial and social justice (e.g., “How would you define racial
justice?”), personal background and experiences with activism (e.g., “What role has your
education played in your activism?”), motivations for activism (“When and why did you decide
to become an activist for racial justice?”), and challenges faced in activism (e.g., “Can you give
me an example where someone has responded negatively to your activism?”). The duration of
the interviews ranged from 43 minutes to 93 minutes, averaging at 63 minutes. Following the
completion of each interview, the research team member who conducted the interview submitted
the video recorded interview to a professional transcription service, and each transcript was
reviewed for accuracy.

Once the transcripts were checked for accuracy, the research team proceeded to analyze
the data in an approach combining inductive and deductive coding. In the first round of data
analysis, the data was approached inductively utilizing open coding, axial coding, and eventually
selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This approach allowed the research team to group the
activists for racial justice. In its standards for reporting qualitative research, Levitt et al. (2018) underline that the
American Psychological Association acknowledges “qualitative studies often legitimately need to be divided into
multiple manuscripts because of journal article page limitations, but each manuscript should have a separate focus”
(p. 34). Per these guidelines, we made sure that each manuscript has a distinct focus and presents a unique subset of
the data, as evidenced by the different research questions provided in each manuscript. For example, while the
present manuscript covers two research questions related to perceptions of race and racism, participants’ decision to
engage in racial justice activism, and the impact of whiteness on white athletes’ engagement in racial justice
activism, a second manuscript utilizes separate data from the overall sample to examine participants’ perceptions of
challenges to and facilitators of racial justice activism.
raw data and identify broader categories. In this first round of coding, each member of the
research team open-coded one of the interview transcripts by assigning a descriptive code to each
segment (e.g., a sentence or series of sentences) of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Throughout the open coding of the data, the research team met every other week to discuss their
open codes, discrepancies in coding, and the emergence of categories among the open codes.
This process laid the groundwork for the next stage in the coding process: axial coding. During
the axial coding stage, the research team followed Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) approach where
“data [were] put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between
categories” (p. 96). Drawing these connections between the categories allowed for the
organization of the data into coherent clusters that would inform the selective coding process. In
the final stage of coding, the selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), we connected categories
from the axial coding stage into higher-order themes that speak to the constructions of whiteness
among participants. After the inductive round of coding, the following emerging themes were
identified: (1) developing racial consciousness, (2) negotiating manifestations of white privilege,
(3) navigating racial justice activism, and (4) strengthening empathy. As is common with IPA
research, the inductive approach allowed us to look at the data without a particular framework in
mind; as such, the framework and themes mapped out in the review of literature were bracketed
during the inductive coding process (Porter & Cohen, 2012).

In addition, a second round of coding was conducted after the first round of the peer
review process for the manuscript. During the peer review process, reviewers suggested the
author team situate their findings more within a critical whiteness studies framework. This
suggestion led to the research team reanalyzing the coded data deductively using critical
whiteness studies as their guiding framework. This allowed for a more nuanced analysis of how
the participants’ experiences and perceptions either challenged or reinforced racial power. The revised themes identified in this deductive round of coding are presented in the results section. For example, the initial theme “Developing Racial Consciousness” was recoded to “Articulations of Racial Consciousness” (see results).

The concept of saturation is to be handled with caution in phenomenological research because the methodology is rooted in the assumption that “there is no end to the new data that can be obtained or to the new insights that can emerge from extant data” (Porter & Cohen, 2012, p. 188). Instead, the data presented “reflects the understanding of the researcher at the time” (p. 188). For this study, the research team agreed we can answer the research questions adequately after the completion of the twelfth interview. This decision was made for the following reasons. First, after twelve interviews, participant transcripts continued to reflect similar ideas and redundant codes and themes manifested. Second, scholars have argued that research studies utilizing phenomenology can be saturated with as little as three participants (Dukes, 1984), so twelve participants constitute a sample that is on the larger end of the spectrum in phenomenological research (Parse, 1990; Ray, 1994; Smith et al., 2009). Third, other studies on similar topics achieved saturation with a similar number of participants. For example, Vadeboncoeur and Bopp’s (2020) sample included seven white athletes when they examined their construction of whiteness in college sport via IPA. In addition, the number of participants is close to that of other studies investigating whiteness in higher education (see e.g., four participants in Newton & Cooper, 2021), white racial justice activists (see e.g., Jacobs & Taylor, 2011), as well as activism in the context of sport (see e.g., ten participants in Fuller & Agyemang, 2018; ten participants in Kaufman, 2008; ten participants in Schmidt et al., 2020;
twelve participants in Lee & Cunningham, 2019), further reinforcing our confidence in the collected data.

**Trustworthiness**

The research team utilized a series of strategies to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study – a key component for quality control in qualitative research (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To ensure credibility of our findings, we aimed for prolonged engagement (Korstjens & Moser, 2018) with the research participants, exemplified by the length of interviews (with most lasting over an hour). In addition, team members reviewed participants’ educational institutions, athletic programs, and their campus communities to get a strong sense of the context in which the participants operated, as well as to build rapport with participants during the interviews. Given one of our recruitment strategies was to rely on personal networks, some of the participants had established relationships with their respective interviewer prior to the interview, which further strengthened the rapport between researcher and participant. Second, the fact that researchers were part of a larger research team helped build investigator triangulation (Tracy, 2010). The research team met on a biweekly basis throughout the duration of the study to provide a space for continued discussion of and reflection on the research at all stages – from conceptualization to the writing of the research reports. Such continued collaboration is particularly encouraged for studies utilizing IPA given the approach’s interpretative nature (Porter & Cohen, 2012). Third, keeping an audit trail allowed us to increase the dependability of the research, which is why we were as transparent as possible in describing each stage of the project and kept records of each component throughout the course of the study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Fourth and finally, given IPA relies on our interpretations of participants’ (perceptions of their) experiences, a continuous process of reflexivity strengthened the trustworthiness of the
project as it allowed us to reflect on the biases our positionalities as researchers brought to the
study. Our team consisted of six researchers with various academic backgrounds, identities, and
entry points to this topic. The first author identifies as a bisexual/queer, white, cisgender man
who is able-bodied. He has been trained in cultural studies, sociology, and communication
studies and his work mostly draws from interpretive or critical epistemological frameworks to
study topics like barriers to social justice in sport. The second author is a former elite athlete who
identifies as a straight, white, abled-bodied, cisgender woman. She has been trained in English
studies, sport studies, and cultural studies. Her work is grounded in critical epistemological
frameworks, specifically feminist cultural studies, to study women in sport and social justice
in/through sport. The third author identifies as a straight, white, cisgender man. He has been
trained in sport and exercise psychology. The fourth author identifies as a white, cisgender gay
man with backgrounds in sport psychology and social work. His work focuses on engaging
athletes, as well as LGBTQ+ people outside sport, in advocacy and community spaces. The fifth
author identifies as a Black, abled-bodied, straight, cisgender man. He has been trained in
sociology, applied psychology, and sport psychology. His work focuses on topics like coach and
athlete leadership development and athlete activism. The sixth author is a former collegiate
athlete who identifies as a Black, cisgender, gay man. His work focuses on identifying/
transforming societal barriers that prohibit access, equity, and inclusion for racial and gendered
minorities in and beyond sport.

Our positionality statement shows that our research team brought together individuals
with racial privilege (i.e., white scholars) and those lacking such privilege (i.e., Black scholars).
Following the promising practices for interdisciplinary research groups mapped out by Krane
and colleagues (2012), we thrived to create a team culture that was non-hierarchical, engaged in
a continuous process of questioning our methods and experiences working on the study, and incorporated reflexivity at all stages in the research process. Because our research focused on whiteness and attention to scholars’ unique position in relation to the group being studied (Berger, 2015), engaging in continued individual and collective reflexivity was of utmost importance to us. In fact, we utilized both individual (e.g., reflexive diaries, interview field notes) and collective (e.g., research team meetings) tools for reflexivity over the course of the study – from its conceptualization to the write-up of the manuscripts for publication. This process of continued reflexivity, including on how whiteness has shaped the study and its publication(s), allowed our team to become what Krane et al. (2012) call a “productive, interdisciplinary entity” (p. 250).

**Results and Discussion**

We identified four higher-order themes in the data, which we situate within a broader discussion of how each theme either reinforces or disrupts racial power. The first two themes focused on (1) articulations of racial consciousness and (2) articulations of white privilege. As such, both themes reinforced limited understandings of the systemic nature of white racial domination, thereby problematizing white athlete activists’ conceptualizations of racism and whiteness. A third theme, (3) articulations of white empathy, provides insights into how white athlete activists utilize empathy in racial justice activism. While such empathy can lead to a more rigorous understanding of systemic minoritization, the participants also centered whiteness in developing empathetic qualities. Finally, participants shared elements of rigorous self-critique

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3 We recognize that the first four authors of this specific manuscript identify as white, while the final two authors identify as Black, prompting the question as to what degree the order of authors reproduces racial power and reinforces whiteness as the unmarked norm. Rooted in our research team’s commitment to equity, we divided our team into smaller sets of lead scholars on each manuscript coming from the present study. This way, we made sure that authorship was equitable across the manuscripts, and author(s) with a later rank in the authorship order are listed higher on order manuscripts coming from the research team.
needed to dismantle white supremacy (Leonardo, 2004), which is captured in the final theme of articulations of white accountability. Together, the four themes provide a first exploratory insight into the complex ways in which white collegiate athlete activists perceive race and whiteness while engaging in racial justice activism.  

**Reinforcing Racial Power: Articulations of Racial Consciousness**

One of the key critiques of critical whiteness studies has been that traditional studies of whiteness reduced the concept to racial consciousness and identity development, hence taking away from whiteness as structural racial power by focusing on the individual (Leonardo, 2004). This focus on the individual rather than the systemic nature of whiteness was also expressed by the participants in the present study, reinforcing findings from the literature that have documented a lack of critical consciousness among some white activists despite their commitment to racial justice (Case, 2012; Warren, 2010; Jacobs & Taylor, 2011). When asked about how whiteness informs their activism, participants frequently pointed to processes of racial consciousness as a motivation to engage in activism. Some participants, especially the seven competing in sports such as basketball, football, and track and field, specifically pointed to racial diversity in their sports as catalysts for racial consciousness development. For instance, Logan (a senior on the men’s football team at a Division I institution in the Northeast) captured this idea best when stating he had been “exposed to people from different backgrounds from the time that I was four years old and could pick up a basketball.” The idea that sport exposed them to racial diversity which helped them develop racial consciousness was shared by Brynlee, a junior on the women’s basketball team at a Division I school in the West, who explained that “just being

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4 Throughout the results section, we use the phrasing “articulations of …” to underline that this data represents participants’ perspectives and, therefore, center white perceptions of whiteness. They focus on intent rather than impact (see recommendations for future studies in conclusion), which is why we use the wording of “articulations of …” to decenter whiteness as an unquestioned norm.
around basketball, I was around a lot of Black people … so I obviously could tell that there was a big difference.”

In addition to their sports experience, participants also explained that time in college was crucial to their racial consciousness, because “there’s lots more racial diversity on campus,” as Ava (a Division III athlete on the women’s cross country/track and field team at a Midwestern institution) pointed out. Other factors in college that informed participants’ racial consciousness include the physical community in which the school was located (e.g., Abby: “When I moved downtown, I became more aware of my whiteness. I became more aware of the comments people would make of why I couldn’t go to certain parts of town”) or the lack of racial diversity in their sport compared to campus (Patrick: “I’m part of the men’s rowing team here and we’re … all white”). Zachary (a graduate student men’s football player at a Division I school in the South), for instance, disclosed that “I’ve never really sat down and thought ‘I’m a white man.’” Participants also reflected on how white privilege manifested itself in their upbringing. For example, participants pointed to the fact that they grew up in predominantly white, wealthy suburbs and had educational experiences that were largely devoid of experiences associated with racial stress. Other participants, such as Quinn (a senior on a Division I women’s crew team at an institution in the Northeast), recounted educational experiences outside of college that informed their racial consciousness. Quinn shared the story of a trip to South Africa with her mother, saying the trip was “when I kind of realized how much injustice there was and how something like identity, something that you can’t control like race, can just be this huge factor of where you’re going to be in life.”

Quinn’s statement illustrates some of the problems in the participants’ turn to activism due to increased racial consciousness; that is, they often work to reinforce whiteness rather than
disrupt it – a finding that supports non-sport literature examining the impact of white activists in racial justice activism (Hughey, 2010; Hughey, 2012; Jonsson, 2016; Mallett et al., 2008; Warren, 2010). When racism is defined as *natural* rather than *human made* (“something that you can’t control like race,” according to Quinn), they reinforce white hegemony (Leonardo, 2004; McDonald, 2005). As such, participants’ articulations of racial consciousness align with recent research showing that white athletes, while being aware of their whiteness, struggle to identify ways in which that whiteness provides them with structural power (Vadeboncoeur & Bopp, 2020; Vadeboncoeur & Bopp, 2019). Their articulations of racial consciousness also provided further evidence for two of mechanisms Hextrum (2020) identified as reinforcing and maintaining white dominance; namely, the facilitation of sport experiences along racial lines (evidenced by participants’ emphasis on increased racial diversity at college), and the creation of environments of racial innocence allowing the white athletes not to question the role they play in perpetuating racism. Participants’ desire to seek exposure to racial diversity, in particular, can reflect colonizing logics as they are exploiting the presence of racially minoritized peers for personal gain (Chen & Mason, 2019). This became particularly evident when athletes such as Zachary and Finley actively tried to engage in conversation with their peers to “relate to them more.” They sought out Black peers to help educate them on the impact of racism – which, as Olivia pointed out, “[has] really opened [my] eyes.” This places burden on the back of Black athletes rather than seeking other sources of knowledge on their own (e.g., reading educational resources or participating in racial awareness workshops). Such colonizing behaviors are in line with Hughey’s (2010) observations of antiracist white activists, who often “use social relationships with people of colour” as “a ‘remedy’ to a negative and empty whiteness” (p. 1299).
Reinforcing Racial Power: Articulations of White Privilege

In addition to naming increased racial consciousness as a motive for engaging in activism, participants also articulated how their whiteness gave them privilege compared to their peers who did not identify as white. This further problematizes participants’ understanding of racism since “the theme of privilege obscures the subject of domination” (Leonardo, 2004, p. 138). Olivia, a junior gymnast on the women’s gymnastics team at a Division I institution in the South, best captured this sentiment when she stated whiteness meant “just being born with privilege … an unearned privilege that so many people don’t really recognize that they have … [it doesn’t mean] that they can’t still support other races, other minorities and stuff like that.”

Similar to Olivia, Finley (a first-year athlete on the women’s cross-country/track and field at a Division III institution in the Midwest) explained that whiteness meant having privilege in a system where white people “have been set up to have all of the things that I need: a good education, … a safe home, and a safe neighborhood … I need to be aware of those who do have a different situation.” Ava added that white privilege meant whiteness is “something that we sort of expect and not necessarily realize that it is a privilege until we see others that don’t have it.”

A second sub-theme that emerged from descriptions of white privilege was that of moments of heightened racial privilege, referring to the socio-cultural climate in which the athlete activists operated that made them hyper-aware of their privilege. Scholars have long argued that increased momentum in social movements have led to athletes’ engagement in activism (Edwards, 2017; Kaufman, 2008; Agyemang et al., 2010; Cooper et al., 2019). Notably, these moments of heightened racial consciousness led to reflections on white privilege, which often led a sense of urgency among the participants, as Summer (women’s cross country/track and field, Division III, junior, Northeast) captured aptly when saying: “It was never something I
thought about, but then once you see it, you can’t unsee it … I just want to talk about it. I want other people to see it.” Among the moments of heightened racial consciousness referenced by participants was the 2020 presidential election, the COVID-19 pandemic and its intersection with the Black Lives Matter movement, along with the unwarranted violent behavior by police gaining national news coverage. For example, Zachary said the murder of Ahmaud Arbery made him realize what his Black teammates were going through. He then “started thinking more and more…[and] realized this has to change and I need to step up and be an ally.” Similarly, for Patrick (Division I, men’s crew, senior, Northeast) “the spark was, as for everyone else in this country, the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor.” Logan also shared an example where a teammate reached out to the white people on the team telling them that “your silence has been deafening,” which led him to reflect on their racial privilege.

Similar to articulations of racial consciousness, these activists’ speaking to white privilege “centers the discussion on the advantages that white receives [and] it mistakes the symptoms for causes” (Leonardo, 2004, p. 138). Scholars have argued that white people are often socialized into misunderstanding the systemic nature of racism by assigning the concept to the personal/individual level rather than looking at how racism and white supremacy are woven into the fabric of every aspect of society (Fields, 2001; Leonardo & Manning, 2017). Despite good intentions, such misunderstandings can then reinforce racial power (Hughey, 2010; Hughey 2012; Case, 2012): in other words, just being aware of one’s white privilege does not lead to structural change (Foste & Irwin, 2020). By focusing on articulations of white privilege, the white athlete activists in this study may inadvertently (re)produce structural white supremacy because their focus on their advantages – rather than why and where those advantages are
coming from – can prevent the rigorous level of self-critique needed to grasp one’s role in white supremacy (Foste & Irwin, 2020).

**Reinforcing or Challenging Racial Order? Articulations of White Empathy**

A third theme identified in the data is what we call *white empathy*. In this case, participants articulated various ways in which they empathized with minoritized peers, racially or otherwise. Indeed, participants discussed the ways in which their engagement in activism for racial justice as white collegiate athletes relied on their ability to empathize with individuals who hold different identities than them – a sentiment that was particularly strong if a loved one or family member had experienced discrimination. For example, Ethan talked about his siblings, who are members of the LGBTQ+ community and whom had faced discrimination first-hand. He explained: “I’ve never been exposed to [that] before [so] that was an incredibly eye-opening thing and it was something that taught me to just be inclusive and supportive of everyone around me no matter what their scenario is.” Quinn explained how growing up with two moms who “are big advocates for gender and sexual orientation advocacy” influenced her political sentiments, saying LBGTQ+ advocacy has “been instilled in [her] personally.” Logan, whose father is white and mother is Black, recalled a time his father experienced derogatory comments “where he got a voice message that was essentially a death threat calling him an n-word lover … he’s always been somebody that has promoted to me the importance of diversity and empathy, so I would say that had a huge role in [my activism].”

In addition to speaking on how significant others in their life have suffered from discrimination, participants also shared accounts of their ability to empathize with their racially minoritized peers due to their own experiences with discrimination based on identities they held beyond their racial identity – such as those rooted in sexual orientation, gender, national origin,
and being an athlete. For example, Olivia pointed out the discrimination she faces as a gay woman when “[people said that I] was going to hell for being gay or that love was made for a man and a woman,” which made her become “just miserable [and] not being [her] true self.” As she put it, “being a part of a [minoritized] group helps to understand what a different minority group might go through.” Echoing Olivia, Abby (Division I, softball, junior, South) noted that understanding more about her identity as a queer person enabled her to “see the world in a new lens.” In so doing, she felt she “had to break open that very close-minded, white, conservative culture that [she] grew up in.”

When it comes to gender, participants recounted experiences related to gender inequities they had experienced. For example, Brynlee revealed that their women’s basketball games were not promoted nearly as much as those of the men’s team, because, when it came to their institution, “they just don’t care … they scheduled a tailgate during our game, before the men’s game right outside the gym.” Likewise, Ava pointed to her experiences as a woman high jumper in college and the lack of attention she was often given compared to her counterparts on the men’s team:

There are times in sports when I feel that I’m not getting the treatment or the attention I should be. High jump is my main event, and I am good at it and a lot of times, we also have a really good male who jumps...I feel that my time is being wasted because [the coaches] are more involved in the male jumper whereas they could be teaching me … I deserve the same amount of treatment and time being put into.

Much like Ava and Brynlee, other participants recalled moments in their lives where they did not feel like they were part of the dominant group. Given that research has shown that holding at least one minoritized identity makes athletes more likely to engage in activism (Mac Intosh et al.,
2020), this finding was not surprising – despite the participants occupying whiteness which

granted them privilege when it came to their racial identity.

Scholars are torn on the role of emotions and empathy, or what some call affective or

feeling-based knowledge (e.g., Collins, 1993; Jacobs & Taylor, 2011; O’Brien, 2001; Perry &

Shotwell, 2009), in racial justice activism by white people. Some scholars argue that affective

knowledge generally, and empathy specifically, are critical elements in antiracist efforts because

it makes white people more likely to engage in antiracist efforts in the first place (O’Brien,

2001). Such empathy also can potentially enable white activists to take the perspectives of their

racially minoritized peers, which can lead to feelings of white guilt that serves as inspiration to

engage in collective action benefitting oppressed groups (Mallett et al., 2008).

However, other scholars have been cautious when it comes to the role of such emotions

in nurturing white people’s activist efforts. For example, feelings of white guilt can lead to

defensiveness, which in turn can counteract antiracist praxis (Warren, 2010), serve as a barrier to

effective communication (Iyer et al., 2003), and lead to them closing themselves off to the

racially minoritized communities they intend to support (Jacobs & Taylor, 2011). These

behaviors can actively harm racially minoritized populations; for instance, they can contribute to

activist burnout of racially minoritized activists (Gorski & Erakat, 2019) and thereby undermine

their activist efforts (Gorski, 2019a; Jonsson, 2016; Mallett et al., 2008).

It is important to note here that, while holding a minoritized identity seemingly

strengthened participants’ ability to empathize with racially minoritized peers, such articulations

did not come without problems. In fact, the participants’ descriptions of empathy inadvertently

center whiteness – especially since they rarely spoke to concepts such as intersectionality which

looks at the interaction of multiple axes of oppression (Harris & Patton, 2019). While research
on activism among racially minoritized athletes often captures participants’ centering of
intersectionality (e.g., Calow, 2021; Davis Brooks & Knox, 2022), the white college athletes in
this study rarely spoke to intersecting axes of oppression, hence articulating minoritization
through the lens of whiteness.

**Challenging Racial Order: Articulations of White Accountability**

A final theme was that of *white accountability*. This theme, we believe, has the most
potential to challenge and disrupt white supremacy since it points to a more rigorous level of
self-critique, including acknowledging one’s own role in upholding white supremacy. White
antiracist activism can be effective when white activists acknowledge “white racism and their
individual, unavoidable roles in perpetuating racial inequalities” (Jacobs & Taylor, 2011, p. 689).
Put more succinctly, Eichstedt (2001) argues that such activists must “embrace the oppressor
label at the same time that they challenge oppressor identity and behavior” (p. 460). Similar to
non-sport white athlete activists (Eichstedt, 2001; Frankenberg, 1993; O’Brien, 2001), this
study’s participants’ awareness of how whiteness manifested itself throughout their lives led to a
desire to utilize their position in the racial order for racial justice action. For example, Olivia
explained:

One of the things that I read that really stood out to me was if you’re not willing to
recognize your privilege and stand up in a way then you’re a part of the problem. And if
you’re not able to take advantage of your privilege … to use your voice and create
change then you’re not going to be part of the solution.

For Ethan, a Division III senior on the swim and dive team at a school in the Northeast, starting
to create change meant engaging other white people in racial justice work, a sentiment that was
shared by other participants whose activism included counteracting feelings of white fragility
(DiAngelo, 2011) among white people. Finley explained that white people often feel “demonized” when racial justice is brought up which leads them to “shut down and put up walls” (interestingly, this is behavior can be seen in white people across ideological orientations, including those committed to racial justice; see Hughey, 2010). The collegiate athletes in this study who were aware of their role in upholding the racial order often pushed back against these metaphorical walls to, as Summer pointed out, counteract white fragility, make whiteness visible (Applebaum, 2016), and “make people have uncomfortable conversations that they want to ignore.”

Since the institutional power of whiteness in college sport (and in larger society) is left largely unquestioned (Frederick et al., 2017; Gill et al., 2020), participants stressed the importance of holding other white people accountable for their actions and attitudes towards race, even if it meant disrupting the status quo. As Finley explained, “you don’t have to allow … what you think other people are thinking of you to stop you from doing what you know is right.” Participants described different ways in which they engaged other white people, specifically their family members, in conversations about whiteness. For example, Summer explained that she often uses examples of gender inequities in college sport as an entry point into conversations about systemic racism with her family and friends.

Holding fellow white people accountable also meant challenging the colorblind mentality and avoiding the white savior trope that white activists sometime inadvertently feed into (Duvall & Guschwan, 2013; Mkwesha & Huber, 2021). For example, Summer stated “if you don’t actually look at race, then you’re just ignoring the patterns of issues and you can’t fix a problem without identifying it first.” This shows the significance of everyday conversation as action towards systemic change in which white collegiate athletes “can also use our privilege to
continue to speak up and continue to be those advocates and show our activism outwardly,” as Ava put it. Further, participants detailed a certain willingness to be “comfortable in being uncomfortable” when having conversations and engaging in activism for racial justice. For example, Quinn urged that “you will have to be uncomfortable and you will have to put yourself out there, and you will have to have this fear of making mistakes, because you are going to make mistakes … all you can do is [do] your best.” It is this sense of vulnerability that is vital to driving change, as Summer explained: “If you don’t make people uncomfortable to see an issue, it’s never really going to change.”

It is important to note here that while participants were aware of the need to be uncomfortable, they also recognized that, compared to their Black peers, there was less risk for them when engaging in activism. As Ethan put it, he hasn’t “experienced discrimination, ... [I can] be as loud as I want and nobody’s going to ... come after me for it.” Participants frequently discussed the consequences of engaging in activism for racial justice. Research shows the subsequent backlash athletes who hold marginalized identities experience, which can include loss of fans and endorsements, sanctions from sports governance organizations, or racist abuse (e.g., Agyemang et al., 2010; Kaufman, 2008). The participants in this study, all of whom hold racially privileged identities, experienced much less violent backlash which reflects the perceived nonthreatening persona their whiteness provides them. For example, Hudson described feeling “a little bit judged” when he engaged in activism for racial justice but he didn’t “really care because I believe in what I do.” Other participants described fallouts with family, friends, or teammates. As such, our study shows the consequences for white collegiate athletes are far less demoralizing and destructive than that for their racially minoritized peers. More white collegiate
athletes, therefore, should engage in activism for racial justice given the power they hold in promoting systemic institutional change without facing major repercussions.

**Conclusion, Implications & Future Research**

The goal of this study was to understand how collegiate athletes holding privileged racial identities – white athletes – understand their whiteness as they navigate activism for racial justice. Because most research on race and activism to date has focused on Black athletes, the present study adds to literature on activist efforts by examining how white collegiate athletes’ whiteness affects their engagement in racial justice activism. Drawing from literature on athlete activism and informed by critical whiteness studies, our research revealed white collegiate athletes invested in racial justice have the potential to disrupt white supremacy when centering rigorous self-critique. However, participants often relied on limited understandings of racism. As a result, they, as white people in sport, inadvertently perpetuate white racial domination. We also found that empathy plays a crucial role in white athletes’ activism for racial justice; yet, such empathy must *decenter* whiteness in order to actively disrupt white supremacy. More promisingly, participants’ engagement in activism was a way to hold their white peers accountable and encourage fellow white people to be more comfortable with the discomfort of thinking critically and talking openly about their whiteness. Both of these practices are crucial to disrupt a system rooted in whiteness.

Given white athletes’ power in engaging other white people to contribute to systemic change, our study has some implications and recommendations for research and praxis. First, our research focused on the perspectives of white athletes engaging in activism for racial justice but did not account for how their Black peers perceived such activism. For example, it is possible that while white athletes perceive their activism to be impactful, such activism may be perceived
differently by peers holding minoritized racial identities. In this study, several participants noted that their racial consciousness-raising improved their relationships with Black friends and teammates, yet we cannot confirm a similar experience from their friends’ and teammates’ perspectives. Future studies, therefore, should examine the impact white athletes’ activist efforts have on the communities they are aiming to help (e.g., their Black teammates).

In addition, participants spoke of the importance of disrupting the systemic issues that provide white people with advantages in the first place, showing how crucial it is for whiteness to be addressed among those occupying it. Athletics administrators should, therefore, create programming that not only engages white athletes on their racial identities, but also maps specific ways in which white athletes can disrupt the status quo. Existing programming on race and racial justice should specifically integrate content on systemic racism and white supremacy.

Second, activism is often led by those experiencing and confronted with discrimination. Systemic change, however, often relies on buy-in from privileged groups. Administrators must provide resources for white athletes to learn how they can become effective allies for racial and social justice (e.g., by connecting them with offices on campus). Third and finally, our participants spoke extensively to the role whiteness played in their activist efforts, yet our study was exploratory in nature, thus further systematic inquiries are needed to understand how athletes can disrupt whiteness. In addition, little research has been done on the challenges white athletes face in activist efforts. Future research must look more closely at the barriers to white athlete activism so that white athletes can more strategically and effectively utilize their position to facilitate systemic change and, without inadvertently reinforcing systemic injustice, be on the frontlines leading for change.
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