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RACE/ETHNICITY IN THE ALL-MALE COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIP: BLACK FOOTBALLERS’ NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT
The quality of the coach-athlete relationship can be affected by multiple factors. These factors include physical in terms of performance, psychological in terms of motivation, social in terms of “significant others,” and environmental in terms of culture. This study explores the impact of race/ethnicity on the coach-athlete relationship by utilizing a qualitative research design. A semi-structured interview schedule was developed to examine the meaning twelve (12) black soccer players ascribe to the athletic relationship with their respective white coaches. Analysis revealed that a number of participants viewed the ethnic background as a meaningful and influential factor for the relationships that they had developed with their coaches in two ways: content and intensity of bond. Participants’ narratives revealed that the opportunity to be coached by a black coach would have allowed a higher degree of communication exchange and empathy. The results are discussed in relation to previous literature.

Key words: Race/ethnicity, coach-athlete relationship, closeness, commitment, complementarity

Sport has become a multicultural and multiracial enterprise that fosters and encourages a united front between people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Such a united sport ideology suggests that people are in a position, regardless of their race or ethnicity, to understand each other’s social and relational processes, behaviors, and outcomes. However, people’s understanding of themselves is influenced by their specific race/ethnicity which, in turn, defines their unique cultural context. Consequently, race/ethnicity consists of norms and expectations that can influence people’s actions and interactions, perceptions, and experiences. This has been evidenced in sport psychological research. For example, Solomon, Wietgardt, Yusuf, et al. (1996) revealed that coaches have different expectations of athletes from diverse backgrounds and treat athletes of particular ethnic groups differently as a result (e.g., African-American athletes receive more instruction while European-American athletes receive more praise).

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Although understanding the effect of race/ethnicity on psychological processes and behavior in sport and exercise has been identified as an important topic in the psychologists' research agenda (Duda & Allison, 1990), a review recently conducted by Ram, Starek, and Johnson (2004) has shown that research has yet to make notable progress. This lack of research has also been observed among psychologists concerned with the context of race as it specifically pertains to interpersonal relationships, processes, and experiences (Orbuch & Fine, 2003). Because race and ethnicity have an important social (i.e., how people view the notion of race) and psychological (i.e., people's sense of their own race) meaning and significance, this study aims to fill the existing gap by exploring the manner in which black athletes construct and perceive the relationship formed with their white coaches in the sport of football2.

In the sport milieu, there are ample examples of interracial coach-athlete relationships both in individual and team sports. For example, Rio Ferdinand and Alex Ferguson in football, Prince Naseem Hamed and Brendan Ingle in boxing, and Cathy Freeman and Peter Fortune in athletics. Cathy Freeman, the first Aboriginal woman to compete at the Olympics, explains in her autobiography that race played a part in her life as an athlete. "It seemed to me that they didn’t attempt to understand how it felt to be the only black girl. They were white and everywhere I looked were white people" (Freeman, 2003, p. 31). Thus, the success many interracial coach-athlete partnerships enjoy, does not preclude the impact of race on its quality (content and intensity) and effectiveness (e.g., an athlete’s well being, performance).

The coach-athlete relationship has been recently described as the setting in which the coach and the athlete develop interconnected feelings, thoughts, and behaviors (e.g., Jowett, 2005). Jowett and colleagues’ (e.g., Jowett, 2003, 2005) 3 + 1 Cs model conceptualizes coaches’ and athletes’ interconnected feelings, thoughts, and behaviors in terms of closeness (liking and approving each other, mutual trust, respect and appreciation), commitment (willingness to sacrifice and stick by or be available, intention to maintain the relationship over time), and complementarity (behaviors that are corresponding, helpful, and supportive, as well as reciprocal whereby one directs, the other executes). Finally, the construct of co-orientation reflects coaches’ and athletes’ interpersonal perceptions in terms of their similarity, understanding, and agreement (see e.g., Jowett, 2005, 2006). Although the model has been used in several cultural contexts (e.g., Antonini Philippe & Seiler, 2006; Jowett & Meek, 2000; Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005), it has yet to be used as a framework in research that considers race as a fundamental factor in the coach-athlete relationship.

In the absence of conceptually framed research that specifically addresses the concept of race/ethnicity in the coach-athlete relationship, we draw from research outside the realm of sport psychology to gain an insight into the effects of race on the quality of interpersonal relationships. Within the general social psychology literature, research has shown that interracial friendships are underlined by “multicultural sensitivity,” which includes such qualities as the ability to respect and understand people of diverse cultural backgrounds and the ability to communicate effectively and work collaboratively (e.g., Hunter and Elias, 2000). Hunter and Elias (2000) stress that “being able to take the
perspective of others facilitates the understanding, respect, communication and co-operation that is necessary for both multicultural sensitivity and friendship” (p. 553). On the other hand, educational psychology research into interracial teacher-pupil relationships highlights the type of attributions and judgments that teachers make and reveals that white teachers think that black children have poorer future educational prospects, more serious problems adjusting to school, and more stereotypically negative qualities than white children (e.g., Pigott & Cowen, 2000). Moreover, it has been found that black and white teachers interact more positively with students who are the same race as they are (Feldman, 1985).

A common theme of this research is the formation of and reference to stereotypes and judgments based on race. Evidence from various sports, particularly, football2 in the 1980s, demonstrates a widespread use of racial stereotypes. For example, black players were characterized as “not working hard in training, not being any good once the pitch gets muddy or the weather gets cold and not having the ‘bottle’ to be defenders” (Burley & Fleming, 1997, p. 187). Also, Jim Smith, a former football manager3 of clubs such as Queen’s Park Rangers and Newcastle United, stated that “Black players use very little intelligence; they get by on sheer natural ability” (in Cashmore, 1982, p. 45) and John Sillet, another former football manager said that “Black players have been known more for their speed, grace or flair” (in Maguire, 1988, p. 261). More recently, Jones (2002) conducted interviews with fifteen semi-professional footballers that revealed that perceptions of racial stereotypes existed such as black players were quicker and did not like the cold.

Racial stereotyping can be reflected in what is known as stacking phenomenon. Stacking revolves around the distribution or assignment of positions relative to the athletes’ ethnic and racial origin (see Curtis & Loy, 1978). An early study by Williams and Youssef (1979) investigated position assignment in American College Football and found that (a) coaches stereotype players according to race, rating black players as different than white players on a number of physical, psychological, and social characteristics; (b) coaches stereotype football positions according to the characteristics they feel are important for success; and (c) coaches match racial stereotypes with position stereotypes, by assigning players of specific races to positions they consider to require characteristics judged to be dominant in those races.

Maguire’s (1988) sociological analysis of race and position assignment in 92 English football clubs during the 1985-1986 season resulted in a number of compelling facts. He found that black players were overrepresented in the wide forward and fullback positions and in roles that stress speed and quickness; they were also underrepresented in positions that require decision-making and intelligence (e.g., central midfield position). Maguire (1988) ascertained that “the evidence supports the contention that blacks are assigned to positions by white managers on the basis of racial stereotypes of abilities” (p. 257). Consequently, it is proposed that such judgments and stereotypes are likely to affect the basis on which the interracial athletic relationship is initiated, developed, and maintained.
To our knowledge, no study to date has directly investigated the context of race/ethnicity in the quality of the coach-athlete relationship. The present study is conceptually framed within the 3 + 1Cs model and employs a qualitative research design to generate understanding of the context of race/ethnicity in the coach-athlete relationship. In this study, athletes’ ethnic background is considered as a fundamental factor of their social and relational experiences. The emphasis is on black athletes’ perceptions in ascertaining issues of stereotyping and discrimination as they emerge in the type of interpersonal relationship they have developed with their white coaches.

**METHOD**

**PARTICIPANTS**

Twelve male black football players participated in the study. All the participants were full-time professional football players, playing on the first teams of their respective clubs in England. Specifically two participants played in the Barclaycard Premiership, eight in the Coca-cola Championship, and two in the Coca-Cola League 1. Five of the participants were forwards, five were defenders, and two played in midfield. When participants were asked to describe their race/ethnicity, the following responses were supplied: four described their race/ethnicity as black British, two described it British West-Indian, four as black African, and two as black Caribbean. Six of the participants were first generation British (both parents were born abroad), whereas the other six participants were second generation British (both parents were born in England). The coaches’ races were described by the participants as follows: six coaches were described as white English, five as white Scottish, and one as white French. The age of participants ranged from 19 to 36 years old with a mean age of 27.5 years (SD = ±3.9). Years playing professional football ranged from 2 to 15.

**PROCEDURE**

Thirty potential participants were obtained through a combined procedure of intensity and maximum variation sampling of the target pool (i.e., black professional football players) (see Patton, 1990). “Intensity sampling” refers to selecting participants who manifest the phenomenon intensely (i.e., they are “experts” and “authorities”). “Maximum variation” refers to purposefully selecting participants that underline the wide range of variation on the phenomenon under study. Consequently, participants who had great knowledge and varying experience on being black professional football players and who had the time and willingness to participate in the study were sought.

A pool of participants was identified from electronic sources such as football clubs’ data bases that contained biographical information. Identified participants were then randomly contacted. This initial contact aimed to describe the purpose of the study, highlight the requirements and procedures, and outline issues of confidentiality and anonymity. When participants expressed interest in participating, they were asked to respond to a basic demographic-specific questionnaire and to complete the consent form. A total of
thirty participants expressed an initial interest in participating in the study, of which nineteen participants consented to participate in the study and returned the demographic questionnaire complete. After studying the demographic information of the nineteen participants, a maximum variation sample of twelve players was selected. The twelve selected participants varied in age, race, playing position, sport experience, level at which they played, and the length of time they had played in professional football. The seven players not selected to participate were thanked for their interest, and the reasons for not being selected were explained. The potential for participating in another research study was also discussed.

The interview dates, times, and venues were arranged based on the selected participants’ time schedule. It was endeavored to conduct the interviews in a period when the players were less physically and competitively active in an effort to avoid encroaching on their football preparation and games. Permission was sought for the interview to be audiotape-recorded and for the interviewer to take notes if/when required. During the introductory part of the interview, issues of anonymity, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of the study were reiterated. The main part of the interview was preceded by questions of a general nature (e.g., interviewee’s sporting history, goals, and aspirations) in an effort to build rapport. Interviews were conducted by the second author and lasted 60 to 90 minutes with a mean of just over an hour. After their completion, interviews were transcribed verbatim by the interviewer. As an expression of appreciation for their participation, each player was provided with a hard-copy of the interview transcript.

The interviewer was a female of white English (British) origin who had received training in qualitative methodology. The gender and ethnic diversity between interviewer and interviewees was viewed as a positive element for this research because it was felt the interviewees would be motivated to explain and describe in some length their experiences to someone who did not know or understand, yet was interested to discover their thoughts and feelings. Qualitative methodologists have argued that “being viewed as an outsider is not necessarily bad for the research because interviewing across class, gender or ethnic barriers produces better results in some areas than when the backgrounds of interviewer and interviewee are matched” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 88). The study obtained approval from the university’s ethical advisory committee.

**Instrumentation**

An interview schedule was developed to examine black athletes’ perceptions of race in the sporting relationship formed with their respective white coaches. The interview schedule consisted of 20 open-ended questions: 3 were introductory and the remaining 17 were carefully constructed with sensitivity to the body of literature regarding (a) the content of the coach-athlete relationship (including closeness, commitment, complementarity, co-orientation), and (b) issues of race/ethnicity. The main 4 questions were designed to invite the participants’ general understanding of the past, present, and future of their relationships with their coaches. (e.g., What is your relationship like with your coach? Have you ever had any problems with your coach?). The following 13 questions...
dealt with personal meanings of athletes’ interpretations of the specific relational aspects of closeness, commitment, complementarity, and co-orientation relative to their race and ethnicity. A sample of questions used to generate relationship data included: How have you experienced such feelings as mutual trust, respect in your relationship with your coach? What is your commitment to your coach? Would you want to finish your athletic career under your present coach? How do you describe and evaluate the ways that you and your coach work together? How does your coach understand your goals, aspirations, fears? Would a relationship with a black coach be any different from the relationship you have with your present coach? How has your racial and ethical background affected the development of a successful relationship with your coach?

**Data Analysis**

**Coding.** Interviews were coded with sensitivity to the ways in which race might affect the content and quality of a coach-athlete relationship. The investigators read and reread the interview transcripts before coding began. The coding required a system in which the units of analysis were clearly defined. The units of analysis included (a) narratives (stories or experiences segments), and (b) meanings (interpretations of lived experience). The initial coding identified the four broad dimensions of coach-athlete relationship: (a) closeness (which included feelings experienced in the relationship with their coach), (b) commitment (which included interpretations of sacrifice, a sense of satisfaction, and a motivation to continue the relationship as is), (c) complementarity (which included observable interactions of co-operation, support), and (d) co-orientation (which included common beliefs, meanings, and perspectives caused by open communication and led to shared knowledge and understanding). Subsequently, within the four broad constructs, interpretations relative to how race affected their closeness, commitment, complementarity, and co-orientation were sought. Clearly, these constructs were not emergent themes because they were largely informed by our previous work (see e.g., Jowett, 2003; Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Jowett, Timson-Katchis, & Adams, 2007). The advantage was that these predetermined constructs or dimensions provided a working definition of “the sporting relationship” and a framework that allowed a comprehensive and comparative analysis.

**Validity and reliability.** Issues of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Denzin, 1994) are often associated with validity and reliability in qualitative research. “Credibility” refers to the fit between the participants’ meaning and the investigators’ interpretation of participants’ accounts. To ensure the accuracy of the participants’ accounts, peer debriefing (Denzin, 1994) was used during the process of analysis. The investigators independently read and reread the transcripts, analyzed and coded the data, and subsequently jointly discussed each narrative. In terms of transferability, the investigators presented a paper to two final-year undergraduate students in sport and exercise sciences for their comments in order to better ascertain the fit between the data and the coding categories. Their feedback was used to revise the coding system. Following this, there was strong consensus between the investigators about the final coding cat-
egories. Dependability is concerned with the stability of an instrument over time. The 20 open-ended question instrument was carefully designed by the investigators and it was piloted once. Subsequently, the schedule was not subjected to further design changes and served as a stable basis from which to generate data. Confirmability posits that all data should be confirmable to the original source. Consequently, all data reported in this article are available in their original form on hard copy.

**Results**

The presentation of the findings is divided into participants’ responses about the impact of race on the coach-athlete relationship in general and their perceptions about the four constructs of coach-athlete relationships (closeness, commitment, complementarity, co-orientation). Participants’ responses are identified by applying a simple coding system next to their statements (e.g., FB 1 = footballer 1).

**The coach-athlete relationship and race**

At the beginning of the interview, all participants defined themselves as having a bi-racial identity. However, six participants included in their descriptions the word “British” (i.e., black British, British West-Indian) while the descriptions of the remaining six did not include the word “British” (i.e., black African, black Caribbean). The participants who did not include the word “British” in characterizing their race and ethical background experienced a higher degree of racial prejudice and also perceived that their relationships with white coaches were less satisfying and less open (e.g., friendly or easy to talk to).

Three participants who did not include the word “British” in defining themselves expressed that race did affect their coach-athlete relationships. For example, one participant who felt that his relationship with the coach was affected by the color of his skin said,

I used to have a teammate who was Jamaican and because my dad’s Jamaican...[I] had a lot of Jamaican influence throughout my life, so sometimes messing around or whatever we’d speak Jamaican slang; the manager did not like it and used to get really upset about it. He once called us into his office and said we were alienating ourselves and alienating the rest of the club. We didn’t feel we alienated ourselves; he did a pretty good job of that himself. (FB 1)

Another responded as follows:

The overall dynamic between black players and white managers and white players and white managers is probably a bit different. There’s probably a bit more mutual understanding between the white player and manager. They [white players] might be better qualified to tell you...I think the manager probably feels more comfortable with the white guys, he sometimes feels a bit wary of the black players. (FB 3)
And another participant explained that his relationship with a former coach was undermined by a “racial statement” that the coach made to him once on the training ground: “He said to me once that he hated foreign players, they cost too much and are lazy. I didn’t know were to look, I had no idea if I was included, if he thought of me as a foreign player or not. I still don’t know” (FB 4).

The remaining footballers and particularly those who defined their race as “half-British” were ambivalent or somewhat uncertain about the influence of race when evaluating the relationship they had with their coaches in general terms. One of them stated that “I take people as I find them and I’d like to think coaches do the same. I don’t really see color in the relationship, after all it’s all about football” (FB 10). Another responded as follows:

I think managers have learnt that they need black players, so they accept them and get on with it. I also think that managers who used to be players are less bothered...I would like to think that he’s [manager] one of those people that really doesn’t see color and that he doesn’t care less if I was purple. (FB 11)

Nonetheless, all of the participants felt that the impact of race on relational issues between the coaches and the athletes was dependent on the individuals involved (e.g., their family backgrounds, personal experiences during their formative years).

When the participants were asked if they had ever thought about the kind of relationship they would have with a black coach and whether such a relationship would be any different from the relationships they had experienced with their white coaches, over half of the participants felt that it would be different (particularly those who described their ethnic background as black African or black Caribbean without including the word “British”), whereas the remaining participants thought it would not. Those that felt it would be different based their views on issues surrounding communication. They explained that black coaches would be more understanding and that it would be easier to talk to them and listen to each other (black coach-black athlete). For example, one participant said,

There’s probably some things I could talk to a black manager about that I wouldn’t really talk to a white manager about…. it is about feeling comfortable and being myself that would then allow revealing a bit more of my personality, without feeling I should apologize for it….I think my color wouldn’t be used as an excuse or a reason for things as I know it has been in the past. (FB 4)

Another expressed that “the only difference I could see is that a black coach might understand the struggle I had to get where I am today and the things I’ve faced as a black footballer, my motivations and ambitions” (FB 7). Only two footballers were coached by a black manager during the course of their professional careers. One of them stated that his relationship with the black coach was different, “essentially more relaxed” (FB 1).
All participants’ viewed the coach-athlete relationship as an important factor to performance success; the coach was viewed as the person that “makes or breaks” the athlete by providing (or not) opportunities that are essential in reaching a level of success. Yet the importance of the coach in facilitating success was viewed alongside other influential factors: “It’s a whole package, the club, the manager, the fans, the media… in an individual sport it might be more about the coach and the athlete” (FB 6).

THE DIMENSIONS OF COACH-ATHLETE RELATIONSHIPS AND RACE

Closeness. One component of closeness that was prevalent in the footballers’ relationships was “respect.” One of them felt that “the coach-player respect means that race shouldn’t really come into it… we need to respect each other” (FB 5). Another said, “I think I have a good work ethic, it was instilled by my parents….Coaches like to be respected because after all, they work hard too to get the best out of us” (FB 1). The majority of the players appeared to have experienced respect for their coaches, their experience, knowledge, even for their football skills and reputation as former players. The latter appeared to affect considerably the emotional tone of the relationship. For example, one participant said, “He’s very inspirational and the career he had [as a player] is encouraging, it increases the respect… He knows what our lives are like” (FB 10). Although respect was an important property of the closeness the participants felt in relation to their coaches, it was generally expressed that a greater level of mutual respect would more likely be experienced by a black athlete and a black coach due to the problems they both had to face as well as difficulties they had to surmount in achieving success and recognition in sport.

None of the athletes expressed strong negative interpersonal feelings such as disrespect or dislike for their coaches. However, two participants felt distant (less emotionally close and personally hurt) from their coaches (e.g., “I was late for training and my manager at the time said to me… ‘You lot are all the same’… People make judgments, but he wouldn’t have said that to a white player…. I was hurt and felt distant from him since” FB 5), and one participant stated that he felt indifferent (e.g., “I don’t have any specific feelings about it [relationship with coach], you go to work, do your job and go home” FB 6).

Commitment. Interpersonal commitment appeared unaffected by participants’ race (and/or coaches’ race). The majority of the participants experienced strong commitment to their respective coaches. For example, one of them said “I would love to end out my playing days…under his management. He has my full commitment” (FB 2), and another said, “My commitment is to the club and him as the manager of the club and also to the other guys to whom I feel close, and the fans that come out” (FB 3). Yet another said, “My commitment is to fulfill my obligations, come to training, listen to my coach’s instructions” (FB 4). Some players talked very positively about their coaches’ commitment to them and the team more generally. For example, “He’ll stay behind after training and do some extra work or things with players. Knowing that he is taking that time out makes you want to repay him by trying hard to improve your game” (FB 3).
Some participants explained that their commitment was more football-related than relationship-related. As one player put it, “In football, you can be the flavor of the month and the next minute out on your ears—regardless of your color” (FB 5), and another player said, “In football, there are too many factors that guide your career and the coach is just one of them—exclusive commitment to my coach may be detrimental… as both coaches and players may come and go rather swiftly and unexpectedly” (FB 7).

**Complementarity.** None of the players talked about racial issues related to co-operation or reciprocation that impinged on the training and instruction provided by coach and received by athlete. With the exception of one participant (FB 12), all participants talked about being very responsive to their current coaches’ interpersonal behavioral style (training and instruction methods). Participants referred to the effort they and their coaches have to exert on the field: “He [coach] wants us to do well so I have to do my best to help us do well” (FB 6). Nonetheless, participants reported that the level of co-operation was often influenced by the mental state each (coach-athlete) was in. Such mental states or moods were affected by issues either football-related (e.g., selection, important match) or personal-related (e.g., personal relationships). A participant (FB 12) felt that a level of co-operation or reciprocation was inevitable due to the nature of both coach’s and athlete’s involvement and he expressed that “I have to respond to what he tells me, right or wrong… The coach is there to guide and support you, in turn the results will benefit us both.” In terms of the affiliation or correspondence element of complementarity, some participants referred to issues of race and ethnicity that appear to impinge on the support provided by the participants’ coaches. A third of participants (4) suggested that their coaches “failed” to provide such helping transactions as pep talk or simply any acts that would indicate to them that they would support them if and when such support was needed. They (footballers) further said that the formulation of these perceptions may be due to their finding it difficult to affiliate and simultaneously to be open with their coaches.

**Co-orientation.** Shared knowledge and understanding were a component of the participants’ relationships with their coaches. This component was reflected in the athletes’ perceptions of pursuing common goals with their coaches, having common beliefs about hard work and performance success, as well as accepting each other’s backgrounds (cultural and professional), although some participants expressed the following: “In professional football I don’t get to know coaches at the same level they get to know me; moreover, they don’t get to know me as much as they should” (FB 10); “It is frustrating sometimes … because coaches don’t get to know us at all… He’s got 20 odd other players to worry about… so I am not the be-all and end-all” (FB 7). Another said, “When I was young, the manager’s approval really mattered to me, so there were things I wouldn’t talk… now I’m confident about myself and less worried about what he thinks. I feel comfortable expressing my opinion and talking about things” (FB 4).

Communication was viewed by the majority as an important element for developing shared knowledge and a level of understanding (e.g., “A lot of stuff can happen as a footballer and you can’t hold everything in,” FB 1). However, communication appeared to be centered more on sport-related issues than on personal matters. A participant said, “It is important to be able to communicate about football, but I also want him to see me
in a certain way; I wouldn’t go to talk to him about personal matters because I don’t want him to see that side of me, it might show weakness” (FB 8). Although “opening up” completely was viewed as a weakness, the majority of participants expressed that it might have been easier to talk to a black manager for certain things (even more personal issues) than a white manager; the black manager was viewed as more understanding and sensitive to their problems due to their similar cultural backgrounds.

**DISCUSSION**

The current study addressed black players’ perceptions and experiences of race/ethnicity in the coach-athlete relationship. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain information from twelve male black football players regarding the content and intensity of the relationship they had formed with their male white coaches. Considering the manner in which participants defined themselves racially and the manner in which these participants expressed their feelings and thoughts, specific and general, about the coach-athlete relationship, it transpired that participants who included “British” in their description or categorization were those who felt uncertain about the impact race had on relating, communicating, and interacting with their white coaches. Their narratives suggest that these participants felt more in agreement in terms of ideas and feelings, as well as alliance with their coaches. These participants spoke vividly and clearly about the respect they had for their coaches, the presence of mutual commitment, and the level of complementarity, particularly as this pertained to reciprocation. According to these participants, reciprocation in training and instruction was underlined by a co-operative and task-orientated atmosphere where the athletes followed the coaches’ instructions and guidance. It is possible that these athletes have undergone an identity adjustment involving their immediate social (i.e., coach) and environmental surroundings (i.e., football context); such an identity adjustment may emphasize, consolidate, and crystallize their “athletic identity” more than their “racial identity.” Past research has supported that athletic identity dampens racial identity (e.g., Brown et al., 2003).

Self-identity is viewed as being socially constructed and is believed to be made up of multiple social roles and identities. Social roles and identities refer to the meanings an individual attributes to the self as an object in a social role (Burke, 1980). Although sport performers have many role identities (e.g., black, white, footballer, husband, student), some become more important than others. Although racial identity has been thought to be a “master identity” that takes priority over others in judgments of the self (Stephan, 1992), our findings suggest that in sport settings the athletic identity may override the racial identity in many cases. Thus, it is possible that athletes who can identify more with their sport, teammates, coach, and organization (than with their racial background) may feel more included than excluded, more active (autonomous) than passive (submissive) members, and more fully immersed than distracted.

Participants who described their race as half-British noted a transformation in current racial stereotypes on the part of white coaches (e.g., “I think managers have learnt that they need Black players, so they accept them and get on with it,” FB 11). This finding is consistent with recent research. For example, Back, Crabbe, and Solomos (2001) have...
highlighted that contemporary football managers appear to be more interested in their players’ abilities than skin color and suggested that the larger number of black players in football today prevents expressions of stereotypic judgments. Thus, incidents of racism in football including the phenomenon of stacking (and the exclusion of black athletes from central positions) as reported by studies in the late 70s and 80s (e.g., Cashmore, 1982; Maguire, 1988; Williams & Youssef, 1979) appear to fade away, yet they are not entirely eradicated (e.g., “Coach’s decision to let me play as a defender surprised some. I think some people think all black players should be forwards,” FB 1) (see e.g., Jones, 2002). Nonetheless, this finding may be viewed as a positive sign of progress and improvement and a reflection of the actions taken over recent years by the national governing sport body to curb racial categorization in football.

Race was viewed by some participants as a factor in the allocation of supportive resources such as advice, counsel, and help. Interestingly, a large number of participants described that an “all black” coach-athlete relationship would be more relaxed, comfortable, open, understanding, and highly communicative (e.g., unrestrained, conversational). This finding can be interpreted from a number of theoretical perspectives that emphasize the importance of perceived or assumed similarity. For example, adult attachment theory suggests that familiarity is a key factor in partner selection. Research studies on social and personal relationships have shown that individuals are more likely to develop and maintain a personal relationship with persons who are similar to them on both demographic (e.g., Sprecher & Duck, 1994) and attitudinal basis (e.g., Byrne, 1971). In educational psychology, studies have shown that black and white teachers interact more positively with students who are the same race as they are (e.g., Feldman, 1985). Corresponding evidence from research in sport psychology suggests that coaches’ expectations of their athletes’ ethnic backgrounds affect the manner in which coaches choose to instruct and support them (e.g., Solomon et al., 1996). Thus, sport participants’ expressions may underline their preference for socio-cultural similarity because such similarity is likely to promote interpersonal activities such as communication and co-operation, as well as mutual understanding.

Social relationships (e.g., teacher-pupil, coach-athlete) are generally formed on an involuntary basis. It is expected that “involuntary relationships” capture a degree of similarity that is reflected in the relationship members’ attitudes, goals, beliefs, opinions, culture, and interests. Such similarity is likely to increase (or decrease) as these relationships are developed and maintained over time (see e.g., Jowett & Clark-Carter, 2006). Whether relationship similarity requires its members also to be similar in demographic characteristics (including culture, race/ethnicity, and socio-economic status) warrants sport-specific research.

In the course of the interviews, it became evident that “respect” or “respecting” was a potential property and process that allowed participants to acknowledge differences between athletes and their coaches that in turn promoted hard work. Respect is viewed as an important property of closeness (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Jowett & Meek, 2000). It transpired that respect may function in a way that encourages the athlete and the
coach to show a degree of sensitivity, acceptance, and understanding while discouraging a lack of concern and disinterest. This finding is in line with research on interracial friendship relations that has shown the significance of respect in promoting understanding, better communication, and co-operation (e.g., Hunter & Elias, 2000).

In terms of interpersonal commitment, participants acknowledged their commitment to the coach and their coaches’ commitment to them. Participants also recognized its importance in terms of promoting a genuine work (co)ethos. However, participants expressed that their commitment to the coach was affected by contextual factors related to the sport’s organization. Professional football differs from many team and individual sports; it is practiced in a fiercely competitive environment with a complex structure and many billion pounds revenue at stake involving gigantic stakeholders (e.g., sponsors) including media and agents. Consequently, for a successful professional career the participants of this study felt that their commitment should extend, and does extend, beyond the coach; commitment to the club, fans, sponsors, agents, and media were mentioned. It is unclear why racial issues related to interpersonal commitment were not evident from the narratives. A possible explanation is that participants’ strong personal commitment to their sport overshadowed the potential effects of race on interpersonal commitment. Therefore, even when athletes’ commitment to a coach and vice versa are unattainable for whatever reasons (including racial), athletes’ strong commitment to the sport may assist in adopting a positive outlook for their present and their future.

This study concentrated solely on black athletes’ own constructions and perceptions, thus future research could extend this study by exploring coaches’ narratives, and/or teammates’ perceptions and experiences of race/ethnicity. Another extension of this study is the exploration of race in coach-athlete dyads that operate in individual sports, who practice their sport in collectivist cultures (e.g., China, Greece, Japan) as opposed to individualist cultures (e.g., America, Australia, Britain). We speculate that most individualist cultures like Britain are multicultural and therefore may be more accepting and tolerant of racial diversity, which may explain why six participants of our sample described themselves as half-British and were uncertain about the impact of race.

Another future research direction could involve an exploration of athletes’ and coaches’ perceptions and experiences in sport settings or contexts where the dominant race is not white. For example, in the English basketball league there is a predominance of black players, while there are an equivalent number of black and white coaches. This is in contrast with North American basketball, where black players are coached by white coaches and as Tim Hardaway (basketball player) once said, “There are so many black players in this league that would hop at attention the second a white coach calls them but act like they don’t even care about black coaches.” Moreover, an investigation into “racial contexts,” referring to the athletes’ and coaches’ racial identity, would allow an understanding of the interconnections among individual characteristics, interpersonal dynamics, and aspects of the particular sport context.

Finally, James and Tucker (2003) have stated that people’s identity (or identities) is not static and is likely to reflect changes over time, place, context, and person. Thus, more research that is designed to specifically address racial identity is important in
order to understand the stability and change of racial identity over contexts (e.g., Does the identity change in different contexts—for example, football versus home?), and time (e.g., What did you think of yourself when you were a young football player?).

Overall, this study revealed that racial issues can affect the manner in which interpersonal constructs such as closeness, commitment, complementarity, and co-orientation are experienced in the coach-athlete relationship. Coach-athlete relationships encapsulate an important dimension of coaching. Hence, the applications of this study in terms of coach education shows potential, particularly in raising ethnic and racial awareness within the coaching community. Such awareness and sensitivity on the part of coaches relative to athletes who come from minority cultural backgrounds may prove advantageous in developing coach-athlete relationships that are both effective and successful (see Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007). Consequently, more research into the context of race/ethnicity in the coach-athlete relationship, and coaching more generally, is important especially when sport continues to grow as a multicultural and multiracial community.

References


**End notes**

1 We acknowledge subtle differences between these constructs however, in this article we use the terms synonymously. Race considers the distinctive biological and physical traits of people (e.g., physique, color) whereas ethnicity considers the social and emotional characteristics of people (e.g., language, religion, customs) (see e.g., Si & Lee, 2007; Ram et al., 2004).

2 The “sport of football” refers to the European game of football, also known as soccer, throughout the manuscript.

3 The terms “manager” and “coach” are used synonymously throughout this article.

4 The interview schedule is available from the first author.