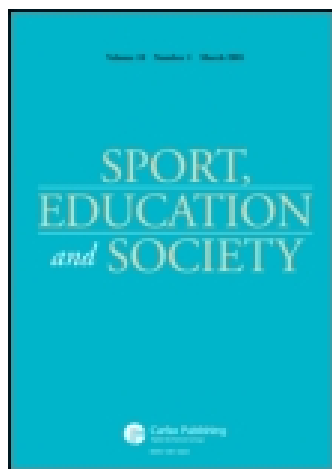


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# Coming to America: challenges and difficulties faced by African student athletes

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There is a considerable lack of literature on international student athletes despite the extent to which colleges and universities are increasingly relying on them to heighten the winning reputation of their sports programs. This research focuses on international student athletes from Africa. Based on interviews of 16 student athletes from seven different African countries, the range of their experiences upon entering universities in the United States, particularly their challenges, were identified. Many of the serious issues affecting the student athletes were matters related to the host environment's underestimations about the African student athletes' desires to learn, misunderstandings about their culture and religions and other negative assumptions that undermined their academic success. We also found that the vast majority of these student athletes experienced negative stereotypes and discrimination based on their race and their region of origin.

**Keywords:** *International students; Discrimination; Student athletes; Student experiences; Stereotypes; Africa*

## Introduction

International college student athletes comprise a significant and distinct student population on US campuses. Enrolment indicators over the past 30 years demonstrate a considerable increase of student athletes from outside the United States (NCAA, 2006). The most recently published NCAA study of international student athletes found that Africa is among the top sending regions to the United States (NCAA, 1996). For example, there are approximately 600 runners from Kenya alone in US colleges (Latta, 2007). International student athletes provide many benefits to the university, not only by increasing its athletic competitiveness and reputation but also by contributing to the diversity of the classroom, institution and sport.

Although the flow of international student athletes to the United States is not new, the driving forces behind international student athlete flows have shifted in recent years from motives related to diplomatic exchange to competition for athletic title gains and institutional prestige. Indirectly, financial forces also come into play.

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Millions of fans pay top dollar to attend sporting events and to cheer and jeer the athletic exploits of young men and women who are presumably attending the institution to obtain an education (Funk, 1991). The international student athlete is often caught in a myriad of academic, athletic and financial interests and simultaneous pressures from their home and host countries.

While most international students come to the United States with the main intention of pursuing their academics, international student athletes concurrently pursue both their academics and athletics. This is not an easy task considering that international student athletes confront the same academic challenges that international students face in addition to the challenges of being a student athlete. International students may not only encounter adjustment problems but also discrimination from members of the host environment. Moreover, student athletes share their own unique challenges. The trainings and the demands placed on athletic performance does not leave much time for academic group work, research and other out-of-class activities that some of the academic fields require of their students.

There is a notable lack of literature on the international student athletes despite the significant extent to which colleges and universities rely on them to improve the winning reputation of their athletic programs. Thus, this study sought to bring greater understanding to issues concerning not only African student athletes, but also international student athletes in general. This research especially focused on the struggles they may face while being valued for their financial, athletic and academic contributions but also having to overcome negative stereotypes and discrimination in the host environment. Beyond simply noting their obstacles as international student athletes in the United States, we focused our research on evidence that stems from being perceived as a 'foreigners' or outsiders to the United States. As a way to critically examine their experiences as international student athletes, we explored their stories within the theoretical framework of neo-racism, the subordination of ethnic minorities on the basis of culture (Spears, 1999).

### **Literature review**

Colleges and universities are increasingly recognising the value of student athletes from Africa (Bale, 1991; Honea, 2005). Added to this investment are high expectations of athletic excellence from the coaches and team mates of those individuals, much of it arising from the assumption that they have to be exceptional for the coaches to take interest in and recruit over domestic athletes. Some coaches view recruiting overseas athletes as a way of bringing 'instant help' to a suffering team (Bale, 1991). While African student athletes can certainly benefit the athletic team, they have also been unfairly perceived or labelled as lacking the basic values of academic integrity and academic excellence (Bale, 1991).

Besides the expectations of dominance on the athletic field, African student athletes also tend to assume similarly high expectations in the classroom. The study's interviewees, for example, indicated that they would prefer to put their efforts into

their academics to their athletics. These African student athletes tend to take very seriously the 'student' part of a 'student athlete' (Honea, 2005). Many international students, including African student athletes, are at least partly motivated to succeed academically because of possible shame and disgrace in returning to their home countries without a degree (Bale, 1991; Lee & Rice, 2007). Despite the high priority that these student athletes often place on their academics, negative stereotypes and discrimination from the host environment can make it especially difficult to succeed.

### *Dismantling the stereotypes*

The literature on African-American students makes some very illusory assumptions that fail to differentiate African-American students from African students. Africans are often grouped together with African-Americans and subjected to the same negative stereotypes (Amalu, 2001; Tradore, 2004). African-American student athletes sometimes bear the brunt of the 'dumb jock' stereotype, an unsubstantiated belief that athletes possess innate athletic abilities but lack academic competencies or abilities (Lorenzen & Lucas, 2003). Africans are often judged under the same false stereotypes as African-Americans including images that portray Black males as violent, unintelligent and disrespectful (Tradore, 2004). There has also been some evidence of negative stereotyping among Africans and African-Americans. African-American students, for example, reported hearing that Africa is a 'jungle' and described Africans as 'savages' (Tradore, 2004, p. 348). Such damaging presumptions fuel stereotypes that Black culture is incompatible with education.

The educational perceptions and motives of students from developing countries especially need to be further considered. Because higher education is restricted to a small number of institutions and individuals in underdeveloped regions, the chance to attend a US university may be especially attractive for students who in normal circumstances may be denied such an opportunity (Bale, 1991). A past survey on NCAA international track and field athletes found that education was the most highly rated migration variable as 'very important' (74.5%), followed by the athletic scholarship (59.8%), increased competition (49%), cultural experience (17.3%) and climatic factors (17.3%) (Hollander, 1980). Clearly, many international student athletes highly regard the opportunity to study outside their home country.

Despite their educational priorities, student athletes are occasionally discouraged from pursuing certain fields of study. According to Engstrom, Sedlacek, and McEwan (1995), faculty held more negative attitudes towards student athletes than other students. Many academic advisers have encouraged students to take light course loads in 'easier' fields of study when their sports are in season to accommodate the required hours in training and travelling. However, one of the problems academic advisers may not be aware of is that some undergraduate degrees have relatively little value in African countries. For example, Kenya does not accept American degrees indiscriminately, and numerous Kenyan athletes have returned home to find that their qualifications in American humanities or social sciences, for example, to

have little or no value (Bale, 1991). Being channelled into fields that are not valued in their home countries can be a major setback for many international student athletes.

### *Adjustment challenges and discrimination*

Several studies have documented the unique adjustment problems that may arise for African international students. Research specifically focused on this student population suggests that their problems were more associated with incorporation into their host environment than separation from their home environment (Adelegan & Parks, 1985). Examples may include different languages (Robertson *et al.*, 2000), perceptions of time (Pritchard & Skinner, 2002) and forms of classroom interaction. Added to the academic adjustment are homesickness and social isolation (Robertson *et al.*, 2000; Pritchard & Skinner, 2002; Lee & Rice, 2007). According to a study on the adjustment issues among African students at a historically Black institution, almost 50% of the African students encountered adjustment problems, some in the form of discrimination from instructors as well as from fellow students (Blake, 2006). The finding is noteworthy considering its African-American setting, thereby suggesting the problems are likely magnified in predominantly White universities.

Discrimination can also occur within the athletic environment. Ballinger (1981) found that African athletes 'have been threatened on many occasions with deportation if they don't do as they are told, if they don't race in every meet that comes along' and that some US coaches have responded, 'send them back to Africa' (p. 60). Bale (1991) further asserted that possible prejudice against African student athletes is an issue that many involved in US college sports try to ignore. Isolated cases of abuse have been known to be directed towards these athletes. A sense of ownership arises when the school supports the students' international tuition expenses, typically in addition to about 1000 US dollars a month for other expenses. Problems arise, however, when some coaches become verbally abusive to the students by threatening to pull the scholarship and send them back to their home countries (Bale, 1991).

### *Conceptual framework of neo-racism*

Lee and Rice (2007) suggest that future efforts and research should not place the burden on international students to simply overcome and assimilate into the host society but for institutions to critically examine ways that they may marginalise students from outside the host country's borders. They identified a range of discriminatory encounters ranging from verbal insults to physical attacks against international students based on a theory of neo-racism.

Neo-racism theory served as the theoretical framework for this study as a way to critically explain the many negative encounters being reported by international student athletes. Neo-racism, or 'new racism', can be defined as discrimination

based on culture and national order (Barker, 1981; Balibar, 1992; Spears, 1999; Hervik, 2004). Spears (1999) more elaborately defines neo-racism as follows:

Neo-racism rationalises the subordination of people of colour on the basis of culture, which is of course acquired through acculturation within an ethnic group, while traditional racism rationalises it fundamentally in terms of biology. Neo-racism is still racism in that it functions to maintain racial hierarchies of oppression.

Neo-racism does not replace biological racism but rather masks it by encouraging exclusion based on the cultural attributes or national origin of the oppressed. In other words, this form of discrimination appears justified through the lens of nationalities than solely by physical characteristics. Underlying neo-racism are notions of cultural or national superiority and an increasing rationale for marginalising or assimilating groups in a globalising world. According to Barker (1981), this new racism reemphasises cultural discrimination based on ideas of cultural boundaries and preserving a national 'way of life', concepts often used to restrict immigration. Neo-racism appeals to 'common sense' nationalist instincts, but ultimately gives fuels principles of exclusion and nationalism. Immigrant communities whose culture does not align with the dominant group are thereby perceived as a threat to national existence.

Neo-racism theory originally surfaced as a way to comment on racism against immigrants in Europe while Critical Race Theory (CRT) has been more commonly utilised to explain domestic racism within the United States. The CRT provides a framework that critiques the power dynamics of race in understanding events and experiences. The CRT criticises legal studies for its overemphasis on class and economic structure, insisting that racism as endemic and deeply ingrained in American life (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT seeks to tap into narrations of people of colour in order to identify assumptions of privilege based on race and reconstruct social reality. Based in legal studies, CRT has been extended to the education field as a way to analyse the inequities in educational systems.

Critical Race Theory has been widely used to research students of colour in the United States but does not fully explain the discrimination targeted to international students. We acknowledge that the worst instances of prejudice experienced by international students are fundamentally racial. However, CRT does not account for these students' sojourner status in the United States. Unlike students of colour raised in the United States (i.e. African-Americans, Asian-Americans, etc.), international students tend to have been raised as part of the majority or dominant culture in their home countries. Recent immigrants from Africa, Asia, or Latin America often do not share the collective, historical struggles of African-Americans, Asian-Americans and Latino/Latina-Americans. Many, if not most, international students are thrust into a new and foreign environment that labels them as 'minorities', regardless of how these students perceive themselves. Therefore, discrimination encountered by international students can be very differently experienced and perceived than by American students of colour. Racism is not only accounted for by skin colour or ethnicity, but can

also be explained by global factors including culture, national origin and historical relationships between countries (Aranda & Rebollo-Gil, 2004; Beoku-Betts, 2004). Thus, neo-racism is a more appropriate framework compared to CRT for understanding racism directed towards international students as it attributes racism to the colour of their skin *as well as* their home culture. Given the inadequate theoretical grounding to explain international student experiences in the United States, this study examines ways that neo-racism surfaces as international students negotiate university life.

While Barker's (1981) notion of new racism originated from his observations of racism in the United Kingdom that was directed against African-Caribbean and South Asian communities, Lee and Rice (2007) were the first to apply this concept to international students in higher education settings. In their study, international students in a US university, the authors drew upon the concept of neo-racism to explain why the experiences of Chinese international students, for example, are sometimes unlike the experiences of Chinese-American students. While there has been abundant research that has documented the many challenges that international students throughout the world encounter (e.g. Robertson *et al.*, 2000; Pritchard & Skinner, 2002; Lloyd, 2003; MacWilliams, 2004), Lee and Rice (2007) emphasised that the reasons may have less to do with any deficiencies among the international students, but more to do with the unwelcoming environment of the host institutions.

This study utilises the theory of neo-racism to discuss how possible mistreatment towards Africans is not easily equated to mistreatment towards African-Americans. While African-Americans and Africans may suffer from negative stereotypes based on the colour of their skin, Africans bear added pressures, challenges and stereotypes that are unlike some of the difficulties faced by people of colour raised in the United States. Past research on neo-racism against international students has demonstrated ways that discrimination arises from foreign accents, stereotypes about the home country and negative views about some cultures outside the United States (Lee & Rice, 2007). In the world of college sports, neo-racism has not been well documented but may be prevalent. Moreover, student athletes are faced with greater public scrutiny compared to most other students because their performance is on public display. For example, websites on various sports allow anyone to post comments freely on the web, some of which result in some uncensored discussions about particular student athletes. For example, one individual posted a message that Kenyans should be removed from the NCAA competition:

I don't think Kenyans should be able to compete in the NCAA. If they are allowed, they should not be able to receive all-American honours. Why? ALL-AMERICAN! They are not Americans. Most college coaches, scout Kenyans, instead of Americans, which is not really fair to us Americans. Abilene Christian University in the NCAA Div.II is probably the best example of this. Six of their seven runners are from Kenya, and the 7th is from Ireland. Fuck the Kenyans ([www.letsrun.com](http://www.letsrun.com)).

This post is just one of countless messages directed at African student athletes that are made public to not only the athletes, but to their fans as well.

## Methodology

With the preceding literature in mind, we sought to critically investigate how neo-racism may surface among the experiences of African student athletes using both inductive and deductive reasoning approaches. While quantitative researchers generally utilise a deductive process and qualitative researchers generally utilise an inductive process, many scholars recommend both deductive and inductive approaches to qualitative designs (e.g. Kirk & Miller, 1986; Hyde, 2000; Patton, 2002). In this case, we deduced the degree to which neo-racism explained the discriminatory experiences of African student athletes at the onset of this study. We also utilised an inductive approach for alternative explanations in analysing and interpreting the data.

This study was conducted at various predominantly White colleges and universities in the United States. Initially the study was only intended for the cross-country team at a single college in the Southwest, but then expanded as the study participants spoke of the prevalence of the discrimination occurring at other US institutions. The interviewees were selected through snowball sampling, which is a preferred method when the desired participants are not easily accessible (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Snowball sampling relies on referrals from initial interviewees to identify additional participants for the study. A limitation of this method is that the findings may be biased and may not necessarily provide a cross-section of the target sample. Nevertheless, the final interview sample consisted of student athletes from a range of athletic teams and African countries. The interview sample consisted of 16 African student athletes representing various teams, including cross-country running, track and field, swimming and basketball, across five public universities and two community colleges from the Southwest and Southern regions of the United States. Four athletes were from Kenya, four from Nigeria, three from South Africa, two from Burundi, one from Uganda, one from Zambia and one from Morocco. The sample included 11 males and 5 females. All the students were Black Africans except for the Moroccan, who was Arab and the South African athletes, who were White. These African student athletes have served as Olympians, national champions and have placed these institutions as among the top in the country for their sports records. For the sake of anonymity, any mention of specific universities was withheld in the writing of this article and pseudonyms were utilised.

The study involved two phases. The first phase of the study included observations conducted by the second author of this study (the 'insider'). The observations were conducted during training, travel to and from competitions, athletic meets and leisure. The observations aimed to witness the social dynamics (i.e. friendship groups among athletes, conversations with the coaches, etc.) in each of the athletic teams and to understand the overall context for the next phase of data collection. In an effort to delve deeper in the research and understand the underlying perceptions among the African student athletes, interviews were conducted. All interviews were voluntary. Interview questions focused on their expectations prior to entering the United States and experiences as international student athletes. The interviews

were recorded and played back to the individuals in order to ensure the accuracy of their answers, as a form of 'member checks' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The interviews revolved around a set of questions that asked about their entry to the United States, adaptation strategies and advice and experiences as an African student athlete in the classroom and on the athletic field. Codes and themes were developed through reading and rethinking the data in light of the literature and theoretical framework (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Among of the strengths of this study is that we were able to take advantage of a team approach that employed both insider and outsider investigators. The first author was an outsider to the African student athlete community but a researcher of international students. According to Patton (2002), 'The ultimate in insider perspective comes from involving the insiders as co-researchers through collaborative or participatory research' (p. 269). As such, the second author was an inside member of the study population, having been a student athlete at one of the institutions included in this study. As an African student athlete, he was not only directly familiar with the issues concerning other African student athletes, but also had the insider rapport to enlist and interview participants for the study. Such a blending of insider/outsider statuses serves as an advantage in qualitative research because the team was able to examine the issues concerning African athletes from two different perspectives (Aguilar, 1981). Our insider/outsider viewpoints were helpful in identifying the complexities of the students' experiences (as an insider is able to do) as well as situate the African student athlete population within the larger context of international students (as an outsider is able to offer).

## **Findings**

Most of the student athletes had not experienced discrimination as part of an ethnic minority but upon coming to the United States, they encountered considerable problems beyond the typical challenges of balancing school with sport. Such difficulties were largely unanticipated when they were recruited to study and perform in the United States. The findings demonstrated evidence of neo-racism among African student athletes along on the following themes: Burden of Ignorance, Negative Stereotypes and Discrimination. The sources of negative encounters were faculty members, administrators, fellow students, including individuals within their sport and the local community outside their institution.

### *Burden of ignorance*

Raised in Africa, most of these student athletes had never been exposed to discrimination based on skin colour in the past. Upon relocating to the United States, many were confronted with the stark reality that they are no longer part of the majority race and culture, leading to some unanticipated problems associated with

this new perspective. A cross-country athlete from Morocco provided the following examples:

Man I don't even want to tell people that I am Muslim any more because even if I told them I wasn't, they already have made that [assumption] since I look Arabic then I [must be] Muslim. What if [I was] Hindu? Sometimes my coach doesn't want me to fast during Ramadan. This is like telling me, 'Don't practice your religious beliefs'.

This student athlete's explanation of his experiences assumed the burden on himself rather than on the institution to be informed. The student athlete further described his situation as being penalised for something his coach did not know. He, like many of the student athletes in this study, felt a burden to overcome ignorant assumptions from members of the host society. In this case, the student athlete also encountered negative assumptions about being Arabic and Muslim.

Several African student athletes also felt some indifference from Americans in learning about African societies and cultures. They described feeling confused and frustrated by the lack of cultural acceptance from individuals in the United States. A track and field athlete from Burundi explained:

Of course its obvious once you open your mouth and speak, people will tell you are not from here. . . . People will judge either way . . . you look different, you speak different, you have different features. [I] am not sure if it's a natural reaction from the differences. Sometimes you might feel like you [are] being judged but people will take the easy route out even if they don't understand you or get what you say. They just want to move on I guess.

The student athlete admitted that he felt like an outcast and that this feeling was 'very damaging mentally'. When he made attempts to reach out to others for acceptance, he felt that his efforts were rejected, leading him to feel excluded and unwanted. Many student athletes in our study reported feelings of indifference from members of the host society that they then translated to being socially outcast.

Several student athletes reported that any attempt to 'fit in' would require them to drop their cultural identity and beliefs in order to be accepted. A Nigerian track and field athlete explained the vast difference between the African and American cultures:

There isn't much that I could compare with Africa. [There are] a lot of differences, a lot. There are lots of things they are used to doing over here and in Africa you can't do that at all. There is a big gap between the two cultures and when you come over here, there is really not much you can do to connect the two and adjust to the culture here. It's good to know and learn the culture here but you have to remember [that] when you go back to Africa, you are not going to behave the same way like you would here anyway.

As in the previous examples, this Nigerian student athlete felt it was her responsibility to bridge the gap between the two cultures but because the differences were so immense, she felt it was impossible. At no point in her interview did she discuss ways that the host culture made attempts to understand her African culture. Instead, she

felt the burden of responsibility was on her to help Americans understand her background, which she found to be too difficult and not worthwhile.

### *Negative stereotypes*

Neo-racism was most clearly evident in the form of stereotypes and discrimination. The African student athletes shared a range of experiences that they attributed to negative views about their African background and culture. The following two sections demonstrate how neo-racism surfaces when African student athletes interact with individuals in the host society.

One Moroccan cross-country athlete recalled a stark example when a few domestic students asked him about some recent suicide bombings and whether he knew some of individuals that were involved. The international student athlete felt that he was being accused of associating with terrorists and thus 'an enemy of the United States'. He responded with shock and then expressed anger about the lack of understanding and the hatred that he experienced, which he attributed to his physical appearance and his Muslim identity. Such encounters were described as not only hurtful, but gave the impression that African students were not accepted and unwelcome to stay in the United States.

Such incidents extended throughout the walls of the university. A track and field athlete from Nigeria expressed her frustration with the institution because she felt that she did not receive any support from her adviser on her preferred major. She recalled:

[The advisors] think people from Africa are dumb, or are not supposed to be smart. I remember after my sophomore year I went to my athletic advisor . . . and she was like, "No, you can't be taking this chemistry [class] and you want to travel. It's going to be bad, so I don't worry about it. . . . No, it's going to be too hard to pass." I was taking four science classes and after I made good grades she was like, "Oh my God! I didn't know you can . . ." You know how people can really generalise that you [are] supposed to be dumb and they find out you not as dumb as they thought.

It remains unknown whether the adviser's recommendation was based on the student being African or being a student athlete, but the student strongly felt that having to continually prove her academic ability was an uphill battle. She attributed the difficulty to negative stereotypes about Africa. One cross-country athlete from Uganda explained that such encounters make it difficult to believe that it is possible to succeed in this country. He explained, 'You find at times being forced to fit in the image of what they know about the continent'.

Negative stereotypes were often attributed to the media and how Africans have been portrayed. A track and field athlete from Nigeria explained:

One thing they have come to accept is that a lot of people here have a very limited knowledge about Africa most of what they know is from the National Geographic channel and those late TV infomercials about starving kids in Africa with lots of

flies around them. . . . From what people see on TV on the Discovery Channel, they say, 'Oh you guys beat up on your wives. I heard you Africans are aggressive. I heard you guys dominate your women'. So they look at you and that's what they see.

Such media images play a powerful role in falsely portraying all Africans as poor and African males in particular as physically aggressive and sexist. Other student athletes described negative perceptions of being orphaned or displaced refugees from the Sudanese war. Several student athletes in the study interpreted such stereotypes as evidence that they are not welcome to remain in the United States.

### *Discrimination*

Some African student athletes in this study also experienced discrimination in the form of verbal insults and harassment. Several of these negative encounters were based on cultural ignorance and negative stereotypes, which we distinguish as neo-racism. While name-calling and insulting are not uncommon on the athletic field, the Black and Arab student athletes in this study felt they were targeted more than non-African student athletes. Given the public persona of many of these student athletes, opinions about particular individuals can come from individuals that these student athletes have never met. Athletics websites are notorious for public opinions, some of which include anonymous, uncensored comments. The following post from [www.letsrun.com](http://www.letsrun.com) is just one of the many examples that depict the negative opinions about international student athletes:

I hope Lagat understands. . . . He will never be a[n] American Athlete to me and deep, deep down I think his heart is in Kenya. . . . He is here for the money (opportunity). . . . I don't blame him for that!

Several students reported being directly harassed by members of the institution, including some faculty members. Some students described feeling negatively targeted in the classroom compared to domestic students. For example, one Zambian cross-country athlete felt the professor disliked him and intentionally excluded him from class discussions:

There are very few professors who are cooperative that you are from Africa. Some professors, if you seem or feel like you are better from Africa, will not give the grade you deserve. You are going to be undermined even if let's say you are answering a question, that question is not going to be 100% until you correct it more. Then, they say yes this answer is correct. . . . You raise up your hand [and] they think that you are going to answer the skin.

Whether this was actually the case remains unknown, but several participants reported feelings of inferiority because of their culture. In fact, many of the student athletes that were interviewed reported not attending office hours because they felt afraid or uncomfortable with their professors.

Another Zambian student who runs cross-country encountered cultural difficulties in communicating with his professor. He explained that he did not make eye contact with his professor out of respect and recalled the following:

And then she explained to me, 'Here, when you are talking to someone and looking down it means you are hiding something. For us it shows respect. You respect that older person but here it means you are dishonest like you are hiding something'. So it's difficult if I become open. That means I am disrespecting her and I don't want to disrespect her. And then I did that (looking down) to many, many people before so people have been like, I am a criminal, dishonest.

This student athlete felt that the professor was not only dismissing his cultural form of communication but described his way of interacting with her as 'mean[ing] you are hiding something' and 'dishonest'. The student felt torn on how to interact with his professor. If he looked her in the eyes, he would be disrespectful according to his culture but if he avoided eye contact, he would be being perceived as a criminal according to the professor.

Many of the student athletes expressed worries and frustration about their unwelcome circumstances in the United States. None of the African student athletes felt they could change negative US attitudes. Rather, they tried their best to endure and succeed without drawing more attention to their negative experiences. A cross-country athlete from Uganda expressed the opinions of many of the interviewees in her comment:

If someone says something, I know that it won't hurt me so much. I just look at them and what I do now is just do what I do best (i.e. run) and if the coach understands me, my team mates some can understand me, everything I do is just try to accommodate everyone. Yah, that's one thing I do.

Interestingly, not all African students encountered neo-racism. The White Africans did not feel they had experienced any overt discrimination as an African. One of the South African swimmers noted:

I thought at first that people would not be as accepting of a foreign person, but upon coming here I found out that people were actually friendly towards me. I was nervous at first, but once arriving and being part of an athletic team made everything a lot easier. Since arriving, I have not regretted the choice I made about coming here.

Additional evidence demonstrates the extent of cultural acceptance based on skin colour. Another White South African swimmer explained, 'Well, I think [White South Africans] blend in pretty well here. People confuse me for an American all the time until they get to talk to me and find out that I have an accent'. While this international student athlete's accent revealed that he was not from the United States, he did recall experiencing any discrimination as a result.

Despite any cultural differences between Africans and Americans, the extent of the difficulties experienced by White versus Black and Arab Africans was notably dissimilar. The White Africans described the United States as 'enjoyable' and easily blended into the culture as Americans. The Black and Arab Africans, on the other

hand, described a very different set of experiences, which was the focus of these findings.

## Discussion

To explore the challenges associated with being an international student and a student athlete, this study interviewed African student athletes in predominantly White campuses across the Southwestern and Southern regions of the United States. The aim was to stimulate a discussion of African student athletes' concerns as an important step in bettering their experiences and averting possible exploitation. It was thus also important to identify possible negative perceptions of Africans in order to address misconceptions. This study extended previous research by calling attention to the specific challenges that may arise for African student athletes.

Evidence of neo-racism was found in most of our interviews. Feelings of exclusion, a lack of belonging and inferiority were consistently experienced by most of the students-athletes in this study. Many African student athletes reported that they were perceived as unwelcome 'foreigners' and treated unfairly compared to their American counterparts. Some discussed that the only way to 'fit in' would be to drop or hide their cultural identity. An especially stark example of neo-racism surfaced when a student athlete recalled accusations of being associated with terrorists. Perceptions of African athletes as outsiders and threats to the host nation were evident when comments were made that these student athletes are solely at the host country for individual financial gain without recognising the larger contributions they make to the university and the sport and their commitment to their team. While not every difficulty is evidence of neo-racism, we propose that many of the instances documented in this study underlie the possibility of discrimination based on negative perceptions of the home country, which we classify as neo-racism.

One finding somewhat challenged our original conception of neo-racism. A clear dissimilarity was between the White and Black/Arab African student athletes. We base these differences on skin colour but also on negative images and stereotypes of Black and Arab Africans over White Africans. The Black and Arab African student athletes in this study encountered discrimination not only for being dark skinned but also for being African. On the other hand, the White African student athletes did not encounter particular challenges associated with their region of origin. They easily 'passed' as members of the majority culture until someone heard their foreign accents. This finding suggests that discrimination based on race may supersede discrimination based on national order when it comes to neo-racism. Thus, this study extends the concept of neo-racism by exemplifying how neo-racism may not apply to migrants who are of the majority race.

While we acknowledge possible tensions and dissimilarities within African countries, the interviewees focused on the divide between Africa and the United States. The interviews produced similar patterns of negative stereotypes and social exclusion across US institutions, type of sport and African nationalities. We also did

not find a clear distinction by gender, although past research suggests that among domestic African-American student athletes, the difficulties for women may be more pronounced (Bruening, Armstrong, & Pastore, 2005).

We also acknowledge that the universities in this study were clustered in the South and Southwest, two relatively conservative areas in the United States. It remains unknown as to the extent to which neo-racism exists in other areas within the country or in other countries. Given that this study did not seek to quantify how much neo-racism might occur, this study opens up new avenues for further research, including extending this research to other regions of the United States and the world, differentiating accounts of racism from neo-racism, and comparing the experiences of African student athletes with other international student athletes and with domestic African-American student athletes. Given the lack of recent research on the international student athlete population, we suggest further research using large-scaled surveys.

Meanwhile, this study has implications for how researchers conceptualise the international students and student athletes, not only for future research, but also for future practice. While the African student athlete population continues to increase on college campuses, practitioners should be aware of ways that they may be unknowingly commoditised as units of athletic prestige and should better support their academic pursuits. For researchers, this study provides an example of how institutions may wrongly place the burden on students to overcome its challenges without critically examining ways that the institution may foster an unwelcoming environment for international students. As this study has demonstrated, higher education is not removed from negative stereotyping that targets particular groups from outside its borders. This study aims to bring awareness to such issues and give voice to many silenced international students, especially African student athletes in the United States.

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