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Savana Nawojski
snawojski@unomaha.edu

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“Contact” Sports: Competitive Athletic Experience, Racial Attitudes, and Intergroup Contact

An Honors Thesis

by

Savana Nawojski

in Partial Fulfillment of the
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Faculty Mentor: Dr. Daniel Hawkins

ABSTRACT

Allport's (1954) Intergroup Contact hypothesis suggests that interaction among people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds can reduce prejudice, particularly in situations that involve cooperation and common goals. Although participation in competitive sports may provide opportunities for cooperative interaction among people from different racial backgrounds, and athletic teams tend to be more diverse at higher levels (NCAA 2019), relatively little work has examined the contact hypothesis in this context. Using a national representative data set ($N = 966$), we examine whether respondents' levels of competitive athletic experience are related to their attitudes toward African Americans. We find no bivariate relationship between athletic experience and racial attitudes, but multiple regression results reveal that gender and educational attainment moderate this relationship. The effect of athletic experience on tolerant racial attitudes is significantly positive for respondents who are female and who do not have a college degree, but negative for male and people with college degrees. These findings suggest that the contact hypothesis has utility in the sports context, but the effect of intergroup contact may be dependent upon individual characteristics.

Compared to lower-level athletics, which center around local engagement, racial diversity within higher-level athletics is becoming increasingly prevalent. The NCAA Demographic Database reported increasing diversity in student-athlete race composition from 2008 to 2018 changing from 75% to 65% White, 15% to 16% Black, 4% to 6% Hispanic/Latino, 1.9% to 2.1% Asian, and 3.7% to 7.4% other ethnicity (NCAA Demographics Database 2019). Furthermore, in 2018, 4% of athletes were designated as non-residents, a category that was not seen 10 years prior. Increasing diversity in upper-level athletics likely provides increased opportunities for student-athletes to interact with teammates of other races. Furthermore, participation in inclusive communities can increase racially tolerant attitudes. The question remains as to whether participation in more highly competitive and more often diverse, team sports is associated with more progressive racial attitudes.

Allport's (1954) Intergroup Contact hypothesis proposes that under certain criteria, interactions between individuals of varying races or ethnicities can help reduce bias and stereotypes of out-group individuals. There is some prior research that examines whether increased contact with diverse races in a sports setting has an impact on cultural adaptability. These studies are not in consensus on whether intergroup contact in the sports setting elicits positive outcomes. Furthermore, while existing research posits the effects of existing teams or artificial teams and their consequence on racial attitudes, studies on whether increased athletic experience coincides with racial tolerance is absent. Our study examines whether respondents' levels of competitive athletic experience is related to their attitudes toward African Americans using a nationally-representative data set and multiple regression analysis.

BACKGROUND

Intergroup Contact Theory

Following desegregation, Gordon Allport (1954) postulated the Intergroup Contact Theory, which argues that prejudice can be reduced when individuals from varying ethnicities and cultures interact. Contact can help build relationships and grow understanding of one another, but certain conditions must be met for this hypothesis to be true. These stipulations include equal status within the situation, common goals, intergroup cooperation, support from authorities, law or customs, and a fifth element added later by Thomas Pettigrew, the opportunity to become friends (Allport 1954; LeCrom & Martin 2019). In a team sports setting, these benchmarks can be easily met. When individuals become socialized into and consumed by their roles as athletes on an organized team, racial division can become obsolete in light of a common goal (Brown et al. 2003). Furthermore, athletics has been noted to be a strong avenue for interracial interaction and promotion of group cohesion (Hirko 2009). An explanation for prejudice reduction through contact was described by Pettigrew and Tropp (2008) through three mechanisms: increasing knowledge of out-group individuals, diminishing anxiety about diverse contact, and developing empathy and perspective. Increasing racial diversity within upper-level athletics could be expected to reduce prejudice through the processes outlined by both Allport and Pettigrew and Troop.

Prior Research

Positive effects of intergroup contact have been described in studies of artificially generated teams. A study by Peachey and colleagues (2015) analyzed the 2011 World Scholar-Athlete Games (WSAG), an event that brings youth (14-20 years of age) together from

40 different countries and generates mixed-nation teams. Effective organization around a “Sport for Peace” theme produced strong results conveying reduced prejudice of participants, regardless of ascribed racial “social dominance,” which the researchers attributed directly to intergroup contact. A related study by LeCrom and Martin (2019) on a sport-based exchange program between South Africa and the United States yielded similar findings. Although the study was short term, the outcomes were encouraging: participants reported expansion in cultural understanding and personal growth. Most importantly, in explaining these changes, the participants alluded directly to components of Intergroup Contact Theory: the opportunity to become friends, intergroup cooperation, and common goals. This research suggests that the combination of racially diverse teams and encouragement of meaningful cooperation allows Allport’s Intergroup Contact hypothesis to come to fruition, at least in semi-artificial settings.

Results from other work on intergroup contact in teams sports have been inconsistent. One study on high school athletes showed that White students who played on a team with a higher percentage of Black teammates conveyed more positive connotations and increased policy support toward Blacks when compared to White individuals who participated in individual sports (Brown et al., 2003). A qualitative study recruited Korean Americans with substantial interracial recreational sport (mostly basketball and soccer) experience to evaluate their takes on optimal conditions for positive interracial outcomes (Lee & Scott 2013). Although agreeing that the opportunity to become friends was present within a recreational sport context, they provided diverse perspectives on the original four criteria postulated by Allport. Furthermore, respondents proposed that even though participating on racially diverse teams facilitated harmony, some informants did not experience long-lasting positive prejudice change from interracial contact .

More conflicting evidence was uncovered in a study aimed at identifying conditional effects of intergroup contact in a sample of female White Americans and female South Koreans (Lee & Cunningham 2013). The hypothesis that increased sport-related contact with Black individuals would diminish anxiety about Black individuals was not supported entirely. Specifically, while researchers uncovered that South Koreans' anxiety significantly decreased with increased sport related participation with Blacks, the same was not witnessed for White counterparts, whose anxiety levels were maintained. Results were suggested to be the cause of individual characteristics and/or due to prior interactions with Black individuals. Other conditional effects of intergroup contact within the sports realm were found in a study of twelfth-grade students (Denham 2019). Researchers looked at individuals who had higher levels of contact with other races through sport participation and examined their appraisals of the treatment of minority groups and their levels of concern about race relations in the United States and found that individual attributes moderated the results. For example, females, Hispanics, and informants from the West who had gotten to know members of other races through sport displayed greater concern for the treatment of minorities. Continuing, females, Black individuals, and respondents from the west who had more interaction with individuals of other races through sport expressed greater concern for race relations. All of these studies convey that yes, increased contact possesses the opportunity for lessening racial prejudices, but key personal characteristics may also be modifying factors.

To reiterate, Intergroup Contact Theory posits that increased face to face relations with minority groups can reduce racial prejudice; however, in a sports setting, more factors may be at play. Previous papers have conveyed that continued understanding is needed within these fields

because individual characteristics and differences, specifically within socio-cultural standings, may influence team-sport dynamics (Hatzigeorgiadis et al. 2013). Furthermore, perceptions of others and pre-existing evaluations of others may sway positive outcomes of contact within sports (Cunningham 2011). Minimal research has been conducted to understand these effects, and no research has been conducted to understand whether the level of athletic experience is related to racial perspectives. Our current study dives into both topics by quantitatively analyzing whether increased athletic experience, which is generally more likely to involve intergroup contact the more elite the experience, influences racial attitudes toward Black Americans. Additional factors (race, urbanicity , education level, political party affiliation, and gender) were also taken into account in the analyses. Rather than looking at existing or artificially produced sports teams, our approach looks at lifetime real-life team sport experience to introduce a broader understanding of sport development and its effects upon racial tolerance.

Relevant Social Factors

Other relevant social factors were selected as control variables based on their potential relationship to both the independent (athletic experience) and dependent (racial tolerance for Black individuals) variables. Those variables are race, environment (urban or rural), education level, political party affiliation, and gender. As described previously, increasing racial diversity is present in upper level athletics. Furthermore, race plays a role in sport preference, possibly playing a role in experience outcomes. For example, it has been described that out of the most common high school sports, Black males were more likely to compete in at least one them. Furthermore, Blacks participate more in basketball, cheerleading, and football as compared to Whites, who are overrepresented in swimming, soccer, and softball and baseball (Turner et al.

2015). In relation to the dependent variable, race poses as an important variable to examine given that tolerance to Blacks is being evaluated. In a 2013 survey, 79% of Blacks polled believed that a lot more needs to be done in order to achieve racial equality compared to only 44% of Whites who believed the same .

Residing in an urban or rural setting has also exhibited an impact on sports participation and racial tolerance. Studies have exhibited that urban members may be more interested in recreational sports and spend more time on sports than their rural counterparts (Chen et al. 2017; Millward & Spinney 2009). Moreover, a clear urban-rural divide in race perception has been evaluated. A 2013 survey reported that 50% of urban members believed that Blacks are treated less fairly in their community compared to only 30% of rural members stating the same belief (Patten 2013). Likewise, educational level presents as an important variable related to sport participation because a bulk of competitive involvement is usually surrounded around academics. Tolerance may also be impacted by educational attainment. An American National Election Studies evaluating data from 1964 to 2012 demonstrated that education is related to a decrease interethnic/interracial prejudice (Henry and Napier 2017).

Political ideologies and sports have a long history with one another, manifesting in numerous forms such as the 1968 Olympics podium protest by John Carlos and Tommie Smith to the singing of the national anthem becoming routine at sport events. Furthermore, there is clear divide in racial tolerance with respect to political party affiliation; in the United States, the divide between Democrats and Republicans is increasing in terms of viewing racism as a “big problem,” with Democrats more so agreeing with this notion (Cooley, Brown-Iannuzzi, and Cottrell 2019). Also, increasingly resentful racial attitudes are witnessed in those embracing

conservative ideology (Maxwell 2015). Lastly, influences of gender can also be witnessed with both the independent and dependent variables. Studies have shown that boys have significantly higher levels of sports participation (Daniels and Leaper 2006). Additionally, research has noted that women express less racially resentful attitudes (Maxwell 2015). By controlling for each of these factors, we reduce the chances of finding a spurious relationship between athletic experience and racial attitudes.

Race, urbanicity, education, political affiliation, and gender were also examined for possible interaction effects with athletic experience. In other words, the effect of athletic experience on racial tolerance may depend on other social characteristics of individuals. Ethnic participation on a racially diverse team may be a more salient intergroup contact experience for Whites than it is for racial minorities and would therefore increase racial tolerance to a greater degree. Growing up in an urban or rural environment can play a large role in what type of diversity is witnessed on sports teams. Those residing in an urban environment may have increased exposure to diversity than those in rural areas, so the effect of athletic experience on a diverse team may be stronger for those from rural areas. Increased educational attainment may result in increased exposure to different ideologies and cultures, so for those without a college degree, athletic experience may be one of the most important opportunities for intergroup contact and therefore highly influential on their racial attitudes. As described earlier, political affiliation in the United States plays a powerful role in predicting racial attitudes toward Blacks. Since conservatives on average express the lowest levels of racial tolerance, there is more room for their racial attitudes to move in a positive direction through positive intergroup interaction in team sports. Lastly, gender could play a role in sports participation experience with women

potentially having the opportunity to form more friendships on a team than their male counterparts due to a more cooperative and less competitive mindset, but the opposite might be true of women who achieve the highest levels of athletic success. These factors pose a risk of mitigating the effects witnessed between athletic experience and racial tolerance.

METHOD

Data

Responses were gathered through SurveyMonkey Audience using a nationally-representative sampling frame with original survey questions. Of the 1,089 respondents who were contacted and agreed to participate, 1,017 (93.4%) completed the survey, with median completion time of just under six minutes. SurveyMonkey Audience estimates the margin of error at $\pm 3.1\%$ for our survey.

Independent Variable

To determine athletic experience, participants were asked, “What is the highest level of competitive sports you ever played in?” Responses categories were: 1 = Never participated in competitive sports, 2 = Youth recreational league, 3 = First-year high school and/or Junior Varsity, 4 = Varsity high school, 5 = Division II or III intercollegiate, 6. = Division I intercollegiate, 7 = Semi-professional, 8 = Professional. Because of low response frequencies in very high level athletics, categories 5 through 8 were condensed into one category of “College or higher.” These responses served as our central independent variable and demonstrated a fairly dispersed range of data (see Table 1).

Table 1. Frequencies for Independent Variable

Athletic Experience	f	%
None	319	33.0
Youth Sports	170	17.6
Freshman/JV HS	147	15.2
Varsity High School	242	25.1
College +	88	9.1
<i>N</i>	966	100.0

Dependent Variable

Survey questions to determine racial tolerance towards Blacks included: “Over the past few years, Blacks have gotten less than they deserve;” “Irish, Italian, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up, Blacks should do the same without any special favors;” “It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if Blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as Whites;” and “Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class.” Responses could range from Strongly Agree (1) to Strongly Disagree (5). Values for responses were adjusted so that higher scores indicated more tolerance toward/progressive attitudes about Black individuals (see Table 2). All questions were combined to form a single dependent variable with a strong reliability indicated by a Chronbach's alpha for reliability of .865.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Racial Tolerance Items

Question	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>N</i>
1	3.11	1.31	1 – 5	962
2	2.82	1.30	1 – 5	965
3	3.35	1.33	1 – 5	969
4	3.12	1.39	1 – 5	968

Note: Ratings are adjusted so that higher scores indicate more racial tolerance with one denoting the least tolerant and five being the most. Questions are labeled: 1) Over the past few years, Blacks have gotten less than they deserve, 2) Irish, Italian, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors, 3) It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if Blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as Whites, 4) Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class.

Analysis Plan

All analyses were conducted using SPSS software. First, correlation and bivariate linear regression were performed to uncover whether a bivariate relationship existed between the level of athletic experience and perceptions of Black individuals. Next, control variables were added to the model to uncover any spurious or suppressor effects between athletic experience and racial attitudes. Finally, interaction terms between the central independent variable and the control variables were added to test if any relevant social factors modified the relationship between team sports experience and racial attitudes.

RESULTS

Descriptive Results

To deduce racial perspectives towards Black individuals, four survey questions were selected to establish a dependent variable (see Table 2). The averages of all questions appear to have fairly neutral responses; however, questions one, three, and four displayed slightly more tolerant responses and question two leaning more intolerant. People generally responded with more agreeance to the notions that Blacks have gotten less than they deserve over the past few years and that slavery and discrimination have made it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class. Furthermore, a moderately more tolerant stance was also witnessed with participants disagreeing with the belief that, “It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if Blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as Whites.” Nonetheless, slightly more intolerant views were witnessed with responses slightly agreeing with the concept that other races have overcome prejudice and Blacks should do the same.

Correlation Analysis

To test our hypothesis that increased level of competitive sports interaction would be related to more racial tolerance towards Blacks, we conducted a bivariate correlation analysis (see Table 3). Surprisingly, the correlation between athletic experience and racial tolerance was near zero. In contrast, there are some substantial correlations among the other study variables. Interestingly, a significant negative correlation exists between individuals living in an urban setting and tolerance. Although the correlation is not large, $-.11$, data indicates that an urban setting possibly facilitates a negative correlation to tolerance towards Blacks.

Further significant relationships were observed for participants with a college degree in relation to tolerance. Again, while not a sizable positive correlation, 0.19, data indicates that individuals with a college degree exhibit more tolerance towards Black individuals at the bivariate level without controlling for other factors. Furthermore, a substantial significant negative correlation existed between identifying as Republican (GOP) and racial tolerance at -0.47 (Table 3). This indicates that members of the Republican party have lower levels of racial tolerance. Lastly, a small significant correlation is identified between female and tolerance denotes that women hold more progressive racial attitudes

Table 3: Correlations for All Study Variables

	Tolerance	Athexp	White	Urban	Degree	GOP	Female
Tolerance	1.00	-0.01	-0.02	-0.11**	0.19**	-0.47**	0.06*
Athexp	--	1.00	-0.03	0.02	0.11**	0.06	-0.23**
White	--	--	1.00	-0.17**	0.13**	0.14**	-0.07*
Urban	--	--	--	1.00	-0.08*	-0.11**	0.06
Degree	--	--	--	--	1.00	-0.02	-0.09**
GOP	--	--	--	--	--	1.00	-0.06*
Female	--	--	--	--	--	--	1.00
Mean	3.10	2.60	.76	.34	.55	.29	.54
SD	1.12	1.40	--	--	--	--	--

$N = 938$

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Athexp = Athletic Experience, Tolerance = Tolerance towards Blacks, White = White ethnicity,

Urban = Living in an urban setting, GOP = Republican

Regression Analysis

Table 4 shows a multiple regression analysis with racial tolerance as the dependent variable. Model 1 confirms that there is no bivariate relationship between athletic experience and racial attitudes toward Blacks, this relationship was essentially unaffected after controlling for all other independent variables in Model 2. Model 2 did reveal that, urbancity, education level, and political party were significantly related to racial tolerance in the full model that includes all independent variables. Racial tolerance towards Blacks was slightly better for individuals residing in an urban setting rather than rural. Obtaining a college degree also significantly positively influenced racial tolerance towards Blacks. Lastly, when controlling for other factors, political affiliation revealed that being a member of the GOP was significantly and substantially negatively related to racial tolerance towards Blacks.

Table 4: OLS Regression of Racial Tolerance on Athletic Experience with Controls

Predictor	<u>Model 1</u>		<u>Model 2</u>	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Athletic Experience (AE)	-0.02	0.03	-0.04	0.03
White	--	--	.14	0.08
Urban	--	--	0.15*	0.07
Degree	--	--	0.45***	0.07
GOP	--	--	-1.13***	0.07
Female	--	--	0.10	0.07
Intercept	3.13	0.08	3.27	0.16
R ²	0.00		0.27	

N = 973

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

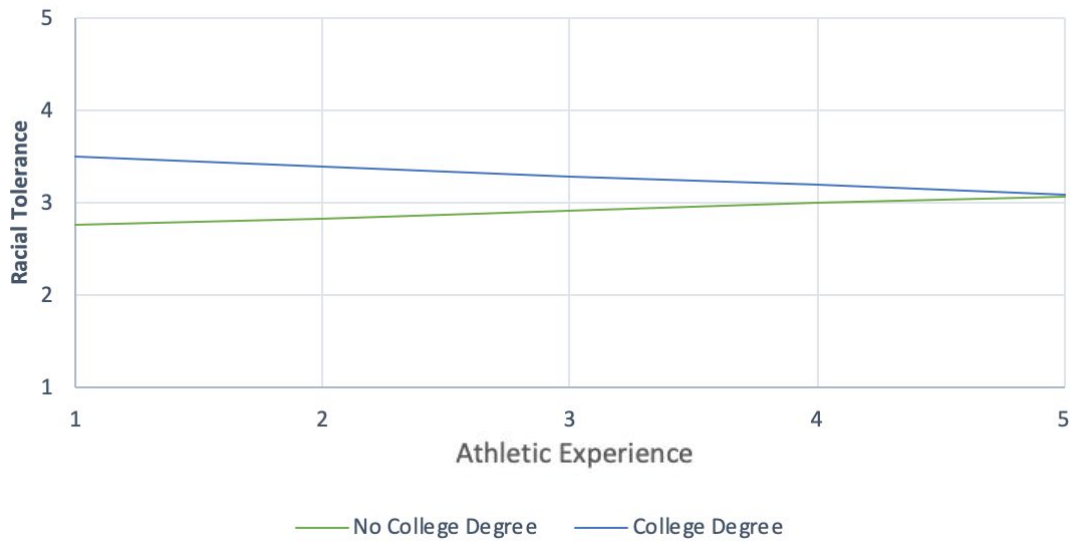
Interaction effects between athletic experience and each of the control variables were examined in Table 5. Gender and education were revealed to be key factors in the role athletic experience plays on racial tolerance towards Black individuals. While increased education attainment augmented the amount of initial racial tolerance, negative effects of athletic experience on Black tolerance were observed for those with a college degree (see Figure 1A). For those without a college degree, athletic experience was positively related to Black tolerance. Furthermore, racial tolerance is positively affected for females with athletic experience and negatively affected for males (see Figure 1B). In other words, females with athletic experience possibly have a diminished prejudice against Blacks compared to their male counterparts with increased athletic experience (Figure 1). Race, urbanicity, and political party affiliation did not modify the relationship between athletic experience and racial attitudes.

Table 5: OLS Regression of Racial Tolerance on Independent Variables with Interaction Effects

Predictor	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Athletic Experience (AE)	-0.02	0.05	-0.04	0.03	0.08	0.04	-0.02	0.03	-0.06	0.04
White	-0.06	0.19	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
AE*White	0.01	0.06	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Urban	--	--	0.08	0.16	--	--	--	--	--	--
AE*Urban	--	--	0.07	0.06	--	--	--	--	--	--
Degree	--	--	--	--	0.92***	0.15	--	--	--	--
AE*Degree	--	--	--	--	-0.18***	0.05	--	--	--	--
GOP	--	--	--	--	--	--	-1.34***	0.15	--	--
AE*GOP	--	--	--	--	--	--	0.07	0.05	--	--
Female	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	-0.16	0.16
AE*Female	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	0.12*	0.05
Intercept	3.17	0.16	3.11	0.09	2.67	0.11	3.46	0.08	3.22	0.13
R ²	0.00		0.01		0.05		0.22		0.01	

* p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.

A)



B)

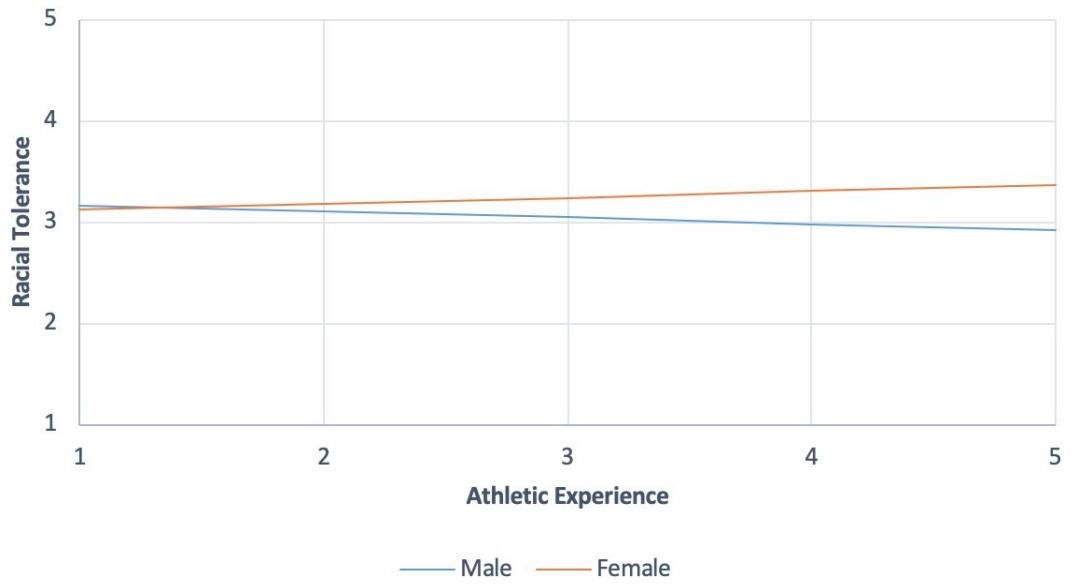


Figure 1. Interaction Effects of Gender and College Degree with Athletic Experience on Racial Tolerance

DISCUSSION

Allport's (1954) intergroup contact hypothesis suggests that interaction among people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds can reduce prejudice, provided that the opportunity for cooperation and a common goal are present. Although participation in competitive sports may provide a setting for cooperative interaction among people from different racial backgrounds, and athletic teams tend to be more diverse at higher levels (NCAA 2018), relatively little work has examined the contact hypothesis in this context. Using a national representative data set ($N = 966$), we examine whether respondents' levels of competitive athletic experience are related to their attitudes towards African Americans. No bivariate relationship exists between athletic experience and racial attitudes, but multiple regression results uncovers that gender and educational attainment moderate this relationship. The effect of athletic experience on tolerant racial attitudes is significantly positive for respondents who are female and who do not have a college degree, but negative for male and people with college degrees. These findings suggest that the contact hypothesis has utility in the sports context, but the effect of intergroup contact may be dependent upon individual characteristics.

Control variables were largely related to the racial attitudes in expected ways. Although urbanicity initially reported a negative correlation, third variable mitigators might have been at play because when controlled for, a positive correlation was elucidated. Following Intergroup Contact Theory, individuals residing in an urban setting have an increased opportunity to interact with ethnicities different than their own, possibly allowing for a positive correlation to be witnessed with racial tolerance towards Blacks. Higher education is commonly associated with exposure to varying ideas and, in general, a more liberal attitude towards diversity and

out-groups. Lastly, the negative correlation with the GOP and racial tolerance increasingly makes sense in the current American political atmosphere in which racial antagonism and White grievance has become prominent in conservative politics.

While athletic experience did not directly affect racial tolerance, it did significantly interact with two control variables, sometimes in surprising ways. The interaction effect between college degree and athletic experience was unexpected. While increased education may not directly diminish tolerance towards Blacks, athletic experience had a negative effect on progressive racial attitudes for those with a college degree. It is possible that at increasing levels of education, competition with one another is increased, academically and athletically. This reality could supply a toxic environment for racial tolerance to be diminished if individually, competition is increased in both sectors. The interaction between gender and athletic experience, on the other hand, is more easily explainable. Women may generally be more cooperative and supportive of one another in a team setting as opposed to their male counterparts, conceivably allowing the opportunity for the mechanisms posited by Intergroup Contact to come to fruition.

Our research makes new contributions through a retrospective lifetime approach in understanding sport's influence on racial perspectives rather than a one-time event as used prior research. Although this study is specifically centered around athletic experience's influence on racial tolerance, ideas posited here can translate into broader sociological applications. Following the notion that increased athletic experience is more often than not also accompanied with the opportunity to interact with individuals of different ethnicities, an understanding of how this process works could be beneficial in a variety of settings. Continuing, while athletics may present a potent platform for establishing a means to apply the Intergroup Contact Theory,

lessons learned in the sports domain can work as a step to understanding how specific characteristics influence other domains. Most importantly, this analysis establishes new information on the possible role of gender and education's influence on racial tolerance in a sports context. Examining if these same influencers reap similar results in other team settings would be an interesting assessment.

Like all studies, ours contains some notable limitations. While our survey offers a scale for the level of competitive sport participation, it fails to identify which sport respondents specifically played at the highest level. Furthermore, it fails to address whether their participation truly was in a team setting or on a more individual level. In addition, while we assume that an increased level of competitive sports participation equates with a greater opportunity for contact with a diverse group of people, competitive sports participation is not a direct measure of intergroup contact. Looking at trends within college and professional teams, our assumption is that this variable offers a good indicator of contact, but this is not absolute.

Future studies should identify a more direct means of understanding the degree of contact established at each level of competitive athletics. Moreover, further examinations of Intergroup Contact Theory in other domains should be examined. Specifically, focus should be directed at whether the setting of contact plays a role on the expected outcome of diminished racial prejudice. Finally, this study points to the importance of looking at pre-existing social characteristics, such as education and gender, that may influence the way intergroup contact affects racial attitudes. This may allow for increasingly nuanced uses of Intergroup Contact as a tool for diminishing the fear associated with "out- group" individuals in classroom, work, political, and civic settings.

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